GIVING CABO'S KIDS, FAMILIES A REASON

BY PAT MCDONELL,
Cabo Tuna Jackpot Director

CABO SAN LUCAS – Dr. Jeffrey Moses won’t soon forget the conversation. A family ap- proached him at the downtown Cabo hospi- tal on the final day of the week-long Smiles surgery clinic. It was late afternoon, and with one more procedure underway down the hall, they could scrub out and enjoy a late dinner, pack and fly home to see their fami- lies after a grueling week. Six days of nearly 40 surgeries.

The mother was holding her infant daughter, who had a severe cleft palate, re- ferred to as a bilateral cleft (the most severe type, but correctable). The father made it clear the baby would not be coming back with them to their small Baja town.

“If you don’t operate on her, I leave her here,” the man said. There were whispers among friends and family about supersti- tions, even hints that the deformity might have been the result of his wife’s infidelity, all comments he had endured for months. As Dr. Moses explained, it is not uncom- mon to see a child with a cleft lip deformity shunned by family and society, especially in poor, rural areas.

“The man simply could not take it any- more,” said Dr. Moses. “He said he would leave the child somewhere, we didn’t really know where.” The mother clutched at her child, tearful there would be no surgery.

“At home we went to the team still op- erating, and said, ‘Okay, I know this is the last one, we leave tomorrow and we’d all like to have a chance to see the clinic and the situation.’ He explained it, and every one of his team, facing another long surgery that would keep them there until midnight said, ‘Hell yes, let’s do it.’ “I knew they would,” said Dr. Moses. “But I had to ask.”

Six months later, the family returned for follow-up surgery. Dr. Moses never knows if they will come back. Most do. He was re- lieved to see them. The little girl’s lip was healed and looked nearly normal – the face of a happy toddler. Like all cleft palates, more surgeries would be needed, but she would live a normal life.

“And you know, when they came to the clinic, standing there outside, it wasn’t the mother who was holding the little girl,” said Dr. Moses. “It was the father. Now isn’t that something?”

This reporter flew down in late April to experience the first day of the Smiles Interna- tional Foundation clinic.

Two times a year on the fourth Monday of every April and October, Smiles International volunteer doctors and nurses from all over the U.S fly to Cabo San Lucas. But it’s not to party and tub. Far from it. They get to work, and they make a difference in people’s lives, which is why they got into the medical field in the first place.

This the fifth year of the program, which began with a measure of wariness in Cabo’s medical sphere. The first procedure was per- formed on a young boy, a toddler. Now, 25 to 30 children are operated on during each clinic. Most initial first-day screenings are low- ered by a grueling schedule for a full week, the teams operating to repair facial deforma- tions – primarily cleft palates and usually on young children from families at the poverty level. At the clinic last April, 14 volunteer doctors and medical personnel flew into Cabo: 4 surgeons, 4 anesthesiologists, 5 nurses, and 2 support staff to join a small but growing cadre of local dentists, doctors and nurses.

At the epicenter of these annual efforts is Dr. Moses, who started the Foundation back in 1987, and his wife Maribel of Encinitas, CA, who he met years later when Dr. Moses was performing across-borders surgeries in Costa Rica. Maribel, a Costa Rican, was trav- eling through there to visit her ill father, and they immediately connected through their spirit of charitable service.

It was also around this time that Dr. Moses was seriously injured in a car accident on an off-day from surgery. Soon thereafter he was:

He had an epiphany of sorts.

“I was lying there in the van after the brakes failed in a van coming down a road from a trip to see a volcano after we were done operating, and as I laid there I thought, ‘I can keep doing four or five surgeries a day if I keep working, or I can retire and devote myself to getting five doctors to do five times as many surgeries a day as I could.’ ”

Dr. Moses and his wife have formed quite a team. Maribel now provides self-esteem counseling to the children and helps the families understand the entire process of fa- cial and spiritual rehabilitation, which she continues at the Smiles clinic, working as the chief patient coordinator, and vice presi- dent of the Foundation.

Proponents of the clinic are among the cities that Smiles International focuses on. There are similar clinics set up in northern Baja, mainland Mexico, a self-sustaining clinic in Costa Rica and one in the Ukraine in the planning stages. It’s hard to image that Cabo, with all its fancy hotels and restaurants is stricken with poverty, but it’s there and it’s very real just a few blocks outside the tourism corridor. For children afflicted with a cleft palate or some other facial deformity, poverty and isolation from a normal societal structure of family and friends and work is an almost certain future. The screening process is just the first crucial step toward a new life.

When this reporter arrived, the screenings and scheduling were being conducted in the remnants of a defunct first floor Puerto Paraiso Mall restaurant. Concrete floors, bare walls, bathrooms gutted. But by the time Smiles personnel arrive, it’s been transformed into a true clinic with rooms created by par- titions and tables and chairs. It’s not the Mayo Clinic, but it’s free to use for the day, thanks to the mall’s management, and the local tamale vendors brought in are tasty and fuel the work.

While Smiles is U.S based, the Rotary Club in Cabo is critical to making this happen on the ground floor. Rotarian Clicerio Mercado, well known in tournament circles, seems to know everyone in town. He and fel- low Rotarians work to get free rooms and lodgings for families and doctors and medical personnel for the week, and the local hospita- tal’s operating room to use. Donations keep costs down, providing more money to pur- chase surgical supplies in the U.S. and ship them south.

At the clinic WOX witnesses, patients would wait outside under a shade tent and on folding chairs, awaiting their meeting with U.S. and local Cabo medical personnel. Many were back for follow-up surgeries, some were hoping to have their child oper- ated on. The consultations take into consid- eration health and age. If a child is sick in any way, fever or cold, they wait a few days, or they reschedule. If the child is too young, Maribel tells them to come back in six months.

“When they hear this, they are devas- tated,” said Maribel. “But we cannot operate. We have to use the right protocols, and we explain that. It is still hard. But we are in for the long haul with these children.” In some cases of infants turned away, they are given special medical tape, told how to use it on the deformed lip to close up the gap, and it can make a big improvement in those months.

“After the screenings,” said Dr. Moses, “we then operate a few cases that very after- noon and then throughout the week daily from 6:30 a.m. until 8 p.m. at the Hospital

Video, Websites, Guidestar and Smiles

A video on Smiles by Erwin Witt of Beduno Productions commissioned by the Cabo Tuna Jackpot was filmed in April and will be filmed again in October as a follow-up. The video will be shown at the Yo-Zuri Welcome Party at the outdoors- amphitheater Nov 2. For a look into the Foundation, check Guidestar, a watchdog for such nonprof- its. It’s interesting. For more information on the foundation and where it conducts other clinics, go to www.smilesinternationalfoundation.org.

To go:

GUIDESTAR Smiles International Foundation
Smiles International Foundation Website

MORE THAN $37,000 was raised last year in Cabo by sponsors, staff and anglers in a variety of ways last year to continue the work. The efforts of the Cabo Tuna Jackpot Foundation by Dr. Jeffrey Moses and his wife Maribel, picture- ted here with a father and his son as videoographer Erwin Witt’s camera rolls. WOX attended the recent clinic and is creating a short video to be shown at this tuna tourney. The young boy was one of the clinic’s first children operated on.

WOX PHOTO BY PAT MCDONELL

A YOUNG FAMILY, 1-YEAR-OLD REINA, HER MOTHER AIDA AND FATHER SAL- VADOR, return with their daughter, six months after the one cleft lip surgery. The difference is startling, but it is not yet complete. WOX PHOTO BY PAT MCDONELL

Cabo Jackpot Director Pat McDonell flew down last April to ex- perience the Smiles International Foundation clinic in action; like last year, all funds raised will go toward purchasing equip- ment needed on-site for the one-week surgical clinics in April and October by volunteer U.S. doctors and nurses and Cabo medical personnel with the help of Cabo Rotary.

MAY S 2016

South _ WESTERN OUTDOOR NEWS _ July 29, 2016
A SURGERY in progress at the local hos- pital. The patients are being treated in 10 rooms, and pa- tients are completed in the week-long clinic. Each $1,000 donated pays for four surgeries.

Especiallyladies. The hospital is owned by Ro- tarian Dr. Alejandro Avalos, who donates its use during the clinic. Dr. Avalos,

"We operate on approximately 25-30 chil- dren during the week with facial reconstruc- tions performed under pediatric specialty general anesthesia," said Dr. Moses.

Fundraising is critical, as with all charita- ble work. But there is a remarkable cost- success ratio going on with Smiles. Dr. Moses said that last year, the relative value of surgi- cal procedures combined with cost for facili- ties, anesthesia, intensive care nursing and supplies totaled over $300,000 if done in the U.S. – and this was accomplished with around $7,000 worth of sterile supplies, effi- ciently purchased by the Foundation due to so many in-kind donations.

The entire program is volunteer-run and overseen by Dr. Moses and Maribel. All ad- ministrative costs, if any, come out of their own pockets.

"All of our team pays their own expenses for travel and takes out of work or uses vacation days to perform these donation surgi- cers," said Dr. Moses. "In Cabo we are hosted by the Rotary Club of Los Cabos and the Smiles Advisory Fund members for team meals during the clinic and supported by them for transportation needs. Our hotels in Cabo have been found and donated for desde- nгарt by the Solmar Foundation."  

Last year’s turnout paid $18,000 over four days. Where does the money flow? First, there are sterile surgical supplies for each clinic session and an estimated $7,500. Each $1,000 collected can support four surgeries.

Think about that for a moment. You’ve been having a little bit of diffi- culty finding the arduous funds for this, and thus we struggle each year for these purchases even though this is a one-time discount through our nursing staff’s connec- tion at San Diego hospitals, purchasing our small orders along with their large volume or- ders.

Additionally, the team currently brings portable surgical instrumentation from the U.S. with them by plane and is subject to the whim of the customs agents at the airport, who charge them customs imprisonment fees even though they are only using their own instrumentation during the week for a char- itable purpose. That’s frustrating.

"This increases the expense for the vol- unteer and Foundation that is totally unnec- essary," said Dr. Moses. "The desired solution for this would be to gradually fund the purchase of instrumentation that would be kept on-site here in a secure warehouse for use during the clinic and even loaned out to our local doctors who we have included on our team to provide the children’s care all year long.”

Donated money grows through matching funds. "I’ve already obtained matching commit- ments from the U.S.-based instrument manu- facturing company KES Martin, who will give us a 50 percent discount on any instru- mentation purchased for this clinic, bringing our cost over the next year so or so to provide the necessary chair and hand sets along with bone grafting and reconstructive kits to approximately $50,000."

Dr. Moses said a grant funding of this amount would provide a set that would be kept in use on-site and always here avoiding the unnecessary customs problems.

"Also, if we obtained a larger sterilizer, we would be able to process the limited surgical instruments faster when cases and we would have to process more cases that involve similar defects rather than putting some of the children off until another visit," said Dr. Moses. The full-time, full-service sterilizer, though purchased at a great charitable discount, still runs around $50,000.

Smiles International’s work is not done in just one surgical effort. Not even close. Many people in the public don’t realize the children afflicted with facial cleft defor- mities are not fixed with more than just clo- sure of the lip. They actually require up to seven surgeries in order to restore them to full function in order to be able to eat, speak, hear and smell,” said Dr. Moses.

As Dr. Moses explained, the cleft lip is re- paired at around 10 weeks of age, and the palate repaired at around age one. Then the ears are evaluated for the ability to clear the ears (popping pressure), and if needed, ear tubes are placed to prevent permanent deaf- ness. The bone in the upper jaw is grafted from the hip at around age 6 in order to allow teeth to erupt properly and the nose is corrected to allow breathing properly. Braces are often placed to prepare the bite for future oral function alignment surgery in the early teens, and this surgery is performed mid-teens years to allow the facial form and the chewing function to become fully functional, he said.

Dr. Moses said the goal is to make all of these stages possible for each child in addi- tion to providing them therapeutic, psychol- ogical counseling on self-esteem and a general head start back into health.

"We do service here, but we would do it without all the protocols we have in the United States. Safety is in our number one con- cern," said Dr. Chimbira. “But by coming we can have an impact on the lives of the chil- dren and the parents, and when you are back at home, it makes you feel as though you have a greater purpose in life.”

"You can see tremendous happiness in their faces and those of their families as well as a general appearance of developing confi- dence,” echoed Dr. Moses.

In addition to providing self-esteem ses- sions with the children, Smiles also offers speech therapy as part of the surgical recov- ery process. Tannia Hecht is a speech pathol- ogist who lives in Puerto Los Cabos. Her husband, Dr. Emill Hecht, is a former profes- sor at the University of Washington School of Medicine and was involved with both Smiles and the Cabo Tuna Jackpot last year. Professionally, he joined the surgical team in April. It was his second Smiles clinic. Last November, two weeks after his first Smiles clinic, he also competed on the For- tune in the 2013 Cabo Tuna Jackpot Tournament and finished 141 kg. "When we caught that fish, I thought ‘Hey, we’ve won the tournament!’ he recalled with a laugh. Of course, a 210-pounder by C-bow won the title. "Well, I live here now full-time, for the past seven years, and it was really kama how we both got involved with this Smiles,’ he recalled. "We were at a party hosted by a lady, Omahg Ah, who puts on parties for sup- port organizations like Smiles, and one of the needs at that time was a speech pathologist. I happened to be there. Turns out, they got two for one, a speech pathologist and a doc-

The techniques, provide better equipment and share ambassadoor surgical relation- ships together with them working on diffi- cult cases,” he said.

The goal is simple. Give the kids a chance. Among the many U.S. and local medical personnel I met in Cabo last April at the clinic was Dr. William Chimba, who was born in Zimbabwe and trained in the U.K. He is an anesthesiologist at the University of Michigan’s School of Medicine. He has served as a volunteer in other programs in Peru and Kenya as a doctor without borders. This is his second tour in Cabo. He enjoys coming to Cabo. It is highly unlikely he has ever seen Medano Beach or Cabo Wabo in full gear.

"We do service here, but we would do it without all the protocols we have in the United States. Safety is in our number one con- cern," said Dr. Chimbira. “But by coming we can have an impact on the lives of the chil- dren and the parents, and when you are back at home, it makes you feel as though you have a greater purpose in life.”

"You can see tremendous happiness in their faces and those of their families as well as a general appearance of developing confi- dence,” echoed Dr. Moses.

In addition to providing self-esteem ses- sions with the children, Smiles also offers speech therapy as part of the surgical recov- ery process. Tannia Hecht is a speech pathol- ogist who lives in Puerto Los Cabos. Her husband, Dr. Emill Hecht, is a former profes- sor at the University of Washington School of Medicine and was involved with both Smiles and the Cabo Tuna Jackpot last year. Professionally, he joined the surgical team in April. It was his second Smiles clinic. Last November, two weeks after his first Smiles clinic, he also competed on the For- tune in the 2013 Cabo Tuna Jackpot Tournament and finished 141 kg. "When we caught that fish, I thought ‘Hey, we’ve won the tournament!’ he recalled with a laugh. Of course, a 210-pounder by C-bow won the title. "Well, I live here now full-time, for the past seven years, and it was really kama how we both got involved with this Smiles,’ he recalled. "We were at a party hosted by a lady, Omahg Ah, who puts on parties for sup- port organizations like Smiles, and one of the needs at that time was a speech pathologist. I happened to be there. Turns out, they got two for one, a speech pathologist and a doc-

In addition to providing self-esteem ses- sions with the children, Smiles also offers speech therapy as part of the surgical recov- ery process. Tannia Hecht is a speech pathol- ogist who lives in Puerto Los Cabos. Her husband, Dr. Emill Hecht, is a former profes- sor at the University of Washington School of Medicine and was involved with both Smiles and the Cabo Tuna Jackpot last year. Professionally, he joined the surgical team in April. It was his second Smiles clinic. Last November, two weeks after his first Smiles clinic, he also competed on the For- fortune in the 2013 Cabo Tuna Jackpot Tournament and finished 141 kg. "When we caught that fish, I thought ‘Hey, we’ve won the tournament!’ he recalled with a laugh. Of course, a 210-pounder by C-bow won the title. "Well, I live here now full-time, for the past seven years, and it was really kama how we both got involved with this Smiles,’ he recalled. "We were at a party hosted by a lady, Omahg Ah, who puts on parties for sup- port organizations like Smiles, and one of the needs at that time was a speech pathologist. I happened to be there. Turns out, they got two for one, a speech pathologist and a doc-

SENDING TO SMILES AGAIN

Friends often grow up knowing each other from the clinics as they go through the surgical process through the years as they grow into their teens.

Dr. Moses was not in Cabo for the tourna- ment last year, when $35,000 was raised, but he and his wife will return to Cabo this year for the tournament two weeks after their October clinic.

"I hope that your group will look at this project as one they can really own into, and with their support, hundreds of thousands of leveraged dollars of cash will be given for a fraction of the cost, and thousands of chil- dren over the years will grow and benefit from their help."

SEVERAL CHARITY EFFORTS PLANNED

There are several ways to donate at the Cabo Tuna Jackpot to the Smiles Interna- tional effort. There will be clothing offered by Mineva’s at check-in and all proceeds will go to the fund, as well as all $10,000 Grand Raffle ticket sales at $5 a ticket (or $5 for $20).

There will be a Silent Auction at the awards dinner, Costa and Gray Taxi- dermy and Yo-Zuri are always dream- ing up creative content for this event, and there is the Costa Charter Charty on the official start boat Cabo Escape. The minimum donation is $20 on Fri- day.

Representatives of Smiles Interna- tional will have booth at check-in if you need more information and would like to meet Maribel Moses and Dr. Jeff Moses, who head up Smiles.