

# Doctors bring smiles to Bolivian patients

## Medical team overcomes government delays, strike

By Jason R. Brimmer  
Editor

Born with a double-cleft lip and palate, the 42-year-old man showed up at a hospital in Cochabamba, Bolivia, seeking one thing — help from an international medical team.

A team of Operation Smile surgeons and administrators, including eight professionals from Delaware, saw him “walk out a changed man.”

“It would be unheard of in the U.S.” for a facial deformity such as this not to be fixed, said Dr. Charles Bean, a pediatric neurologist who traveled to Bolivia last month. “There’s two issues. It’s not just the lip. It’s the palate, which affects speech; hearing because they get frequent ear infections; and eating because of food going up into the nose.”

That man was one of more than 100 whose lives were changed during this year’s mission to Bolivia by Norfolk, Va.-based Operation Smile. The non-profit group, whose four-year-old Delaware chapter helped fund the Bolivian expedition, was founded to provide reconstructive surgery and related health care to those with facial and other debilitating deformities both domestically and internationally.

Only one in 800 children born in the U.S. has a facial deformity such as a cleft lip or palate, according to Xavier DeCaire of Brandywine, an administrator who dealt with patient records for the Bolivia expedition. In some Third World countries such as Bolivia, that number could be as high as one in 400.

“Many of these countries don’t have the financial resources or the political will to take care of these cases,” DeCaire said.



This 42-year-old man (above) with a double-cleft lip and palate arrived at the Cochabamba hospital on the last day of Operation Smile surgeries. He left a changed man (below).



Operation Smile pairs international teams with local groups to perform surgeries. The Operation Smile organization has plenty of experience in these kinds of expeditions, which it has funded since 1982, but the Bolivian trip ran into unexpected complications.

When the team of 41 doctors, nurses, dentists and other professionals arrived in Bolivia, its 55 crates of medical supplies were held up in customs. Operation Smile teams take all of their own supplies, in some cases including equipment, into the countries they visit.

Arriving on Tuesday, the team spent five days screening potential patients, with surgeries to begin on Monday. But the Bolivian minister of health, operating out of the Bolivian capital of La Paz, refused to grant temporary medical credentials to the group.

“The minister of health doesn’t necessarily like to have Americans, foreigners, coming into his country,” DeCaire said. By Monday, the team had screened 282 people for surgery, but couldn’t operate.

“The conditions we worked under were very poor,” DeCaire said.

Screening patients, the process through which physicians evaluate which patients are candidates for surgery, was the hardest part of the trip, Bean said.

“It was something I had to learn,” Bean said. “Sometimes we couldn’t spend all of the time we’d like to.”

But spending extra time with a patient he couldn’t help was a trap Bean said he had to avoid.

“You don’t want to miss that one person in the back you can help,” he said. “How many times do you get six great plastic surgeons lined up in this town? We wanted to keep them busy.”

The extra day of screening, with no surgeries, meant that physicians could spend some extra time with patients than usual, however.

“You open the doors and everyone just comes in,” said D. Michael Gioffre Jr. of Brandywine, a dentist resident at Wilmington Hospital.

One mother who had given birth at home three days earlier brought her infant, born with a double cleft lip and palate, to the hospital. The baby was losing weight because it couldn’t eat — the milk just “squirted out its nose,” Bean said.

One of the team’s speech therapists found a feeding tube to give the mother, and put the baby on next year’s list of patients. Because of the lack of pediatric facilities, Operation Smile teams usually do not operate on children under one year old.

“When people came, we did what we could to refer them to local care,” Bean said. “Sometimes, I think we may have been the only people some of these parents have spoken to about the health of their kids.”

The minister of health granted temporary credentials on Tuesday, but the



Wilmington pediatric neurologist Dr. Charles Bean (right) and nurse Sandi Holahan (left) worked on screening patients before surgery.

Operation Smile team was now faced with its greatest challenge. Cochabamba was on strike.

Residents of the city were angered by increases in the price of water, which were initiated by an British/American firm who had contracted with the government to improve the water supply.

One woman who worked with DeCaire said that she made just \$400 a month as a doctor in Cochabamba, and paid 10 percent of that for water.

The general strike shut down services, particularly transportation, and demonstrators manned barricades in the streets for most of the day.

“If you could leave the hotel by six, you could get to the hospital,” Bean said. “Any later, and the barricades were manned.”

Because of the strike, all of the team’s patients had to walk to the Cochabamba hospital where the team was working.

“We had some people walk two or three days” to get to us, DeCaire said. One boy’s sister walked three days to a remote village to tell him about the operations. Some of the people who had already been screened for surgery now couldn’t make it back to the hospital.

Despite the complications, the Operation Smile dentists and plastic surgeons were able to perform more than 100 surgical and 115 dental operations in four days, DeCaire said.

“The important thing is that despite a lot of problems, we were still able to do surgeries,” Bean said. “That was all possible only with the help of the Bolivians.”

Ninety percent of those helped were children, about average for Operation Smile missions, DeCaire said. Many of the patients would have been unable to lead normal lives, or even speak correctly, without the surgeries. But the actual operations are just part of Operation Smile’s plan to help.

“One of the ideas of Operation Smile is to help them become self-sufficient,” Bean said. The teams work with local physicians to teach them how to do the operations and serves as an example of people helping other people.



Local dentist D. Michael Gioffre Jr. of Brandywine (center) works with a Bolivian dentist to examine patients during Operation Smile’s Bolivian expedition.

“It’s more than just physically doing the cases. It’s hoping to change a community to have a commitment to do volunteer work,” Bean said.

Because of rising tensions with the strike, the team left Cochabamba earlier than expected. They were stopped by a mob with sticks at the airport — and had to hide in a freight bin.

“We got just 20 yards from the front door, then we had to walk five kilometers back to the hotel,” DeCaire said. On their second attempt to leave, a taxi driver scab who crossed strike lines tried to drive them to the airport but was stopped at a barricade.

“They got very angry at that cabby and started breaking the windows,” Bean said. A local newscaster talked them through the crowd.

Despite the challenges they faced, DeCaire, Gioffre and Bean were enthusiastic about the expedition and the Bolivian people.

“There are always people helping us out,” Bean said.

“One of the great things you get out of these missions is not only do you meet a great team to work with, you do the same thing with people in the countries you go to,” Gioffre said. “And that’s just on top of the fulfillment of helping children and seeing them smile. It’s definitely addicting.”

In fact, Gioffre is leaving on his fifth Operation Smile trip in June.

This was Bean’s first expedition.

“I went with a little bit of hesitancy. Are we doing any good?” he said. “For two weeks I was able to practice medicine without the managed care, consent forms and insurance paper work. Just, how do I help this child? I came back with a great deal of energy. I think you have the chance to touch a lot of lives.”