

# The Donner Canadian Foundation: Strengthening Smiles and Medical Care Capacity in India

An estimated one out of every 500 to 600 babies in the developing world is born with a cleft lip or cleft palate. These congenital defects occur early in embryonic development and result in an opening in the lip, in the roof of the mouth, or in the soft tissue in the back of the mouth. Serious medical problems often accompany these deformities, and many children with them cannot speak, hear, or eat normally, suffering intense social stigma.

In Canada and other developed countries, skilled doctors promptly address these medical conditions, but in developing countries, shortages of trained medical personnel and adequate facilities doom most children with cleft lips or palates to lives of isolation and misery.

Since 2004, the Donner Canadian Foundation has been working to improve the fate of some of these children by providing the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) with grants that support collaboration and a long-term commitment to building local capacity in rural West Bengal, India. The foundation support has strengthened the relationship between Dr. Ronald Zuker, a surgeon at the hospital's division of plastic surgery, and Operation Smile, a U.S.-based charity devoted to repairing childhood facial deformities and building sustainable health care systems in the developing world.

With support from the foundation, SickKids and Operation



Operation Smile helps children suffering from cleft lip.

Smile undertook a mission to Bolpur, India, in early 2005. Dr. Zuker and his volunteer team of plastic surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses, paediatricians, a dentist, and a speech pathologist spent two weeks at the Bolpur Sub-Division Hospital screening close to 600 patients and carrying out 139 operations on young girls and boys with cleft lips, cleft palates, and other facial deformities. A foundation board member who accompanied the mission explained the team's immediate impact: "Children born with cleft lips and facial deformities in India are often regarded as cursed by the gods, and are as a result ostracized by their communities. It is difficult to describe how uplifting it was to see these children, once regarded as pariahs and burdens to their families, emerge from the operating room

with beautiful new smiles." Also remarkable is the affordability of such life-changing operations, which can be delivered in India for approximately \$300 each.

Building on the impact of these operations - which improved the children's ability to eat, speak, and interact with their peers and families - is SickKids and Operation Smile's emphasis on local capacity building. The Foundation's grant enabled the purchase of patient monitors, anesthesia machines, and other medical equipment, which were left at the Bolpur hospital and greatly increased its ability to serve the local population. In addition, local nurses and doctors learned techniques for repairing facial deformities that they could apply long after the visiting

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medical personnel had returned home.

Subsequent annual missions in West Bengal undertaken by SickKids and Operation Smile will build upon these skills, thereby leaving a strong legacy of improved medical care in the region.

To further sustain this legacy, Dr. Zuker has a goal during his next mission of identifying West Bengalese candidates for foundation-sponsored fellowships at

SickKids. Under the guidance of Dr. Zuker, these year-long fellowships train doctors from the developing world to manage complex surgical problems and to establish and manage cleft lip and palate programs in their home countries. A previous fellow, Dr. Cherry Librojo from the Philippines, has not only applied her enhanced skills in her own country but also took part in the Bolpur mission.

The work of Dr. Zuker, Dr. Librojo, and their colleagues at SickKids and Operation Smile

demonstrate the immediate and long-term change that can come from collaboration and building local capacity. The Donner Canadian Foundation is proud to be supporting their efforts as part of its funding program for sustainable international development.

*For information, contact the Donner Canadian Foundation ([www.donnerfoundation.org](http://www.donnerfoundation.org)), SickKids ([www.sickkids.on.ca](http://www.sickkids.on.ca)) and Operation Smile ([www.operationsmile.org](http://www.operationsmile.org)).*