

Local doctors and nurses change lives for Third World children

By TAMARA GRIPP

FOR EIGHT years, Carmel's David Morwood, M.D., has spent his vacations working 14-hour days in South America, performing at least six surgeries per day, seven days a week.

And Morwood wouldn't want it any other way.

The plastic surgeon is a member of "Rotaplast" — a group of surgeons and nurses sponsored by Rotary International who perform free surgeries for underprivileged children born with cleft lips and palates.

The medical team spent two weeks in March, performing 100 such surgeries in Cumanagato, a city in Venezuela.

Many of the children who grow up in Venezuela, Chile or Argentina go their entire life with cleft lips — a split in the skin where the lips formed improperly.

"The kids have pretty much been treated as outcasts," Morwood said. "They grow up afraid to speak up in class. They go to school and wear a bandana over their mouths."

Every year, the volunteer doctors and nurses make six trips to different South American countries. When parents get word the surgeons are coming, they'll travel with their children hundreds of miles by bus and train.

"One kid came from literally 1,000 miles away," Morwood said.

"When the children come out of surgery and their parents see them, they don't talk, but you can see the tears dripping out of their eyes," said Kathleen Geisler, a nurse and Carmel resident who has volunteered with the Rotaplast group for the last five years.

Surgery by flashlight

The American doctors and nurses work at the native hospitals under "pretty basic" conditions, Morwood said. The medical teams usually bring extra equipment with them to supplement the hospital's supplies.

"The last time we went to Venezuela, the water went off twice and the power went off twice in one day. We've had to operate literally with a flashlight," he said.

Morwood explained that the 90-minute cleft lip surgery is like "the World Series or the Superbowl" to the surgeons.

"The parents bring the children to us with a terrible deformity and as they grow they're going to have our marks on them for the rest

of their lives," he said. "It's very delicate work, a mix of art and science."

Children who are born with cleft lips and palates in the U.S. typically have their first surgery as infants and then another four operations by age 18, Morwood said.

Consequently, most Americans have never seen a person with a cleft lip and palate. While Venezuela and Argentina have skilled plastic surgeons, those countries are overwhelmed by the numbers of affected children and shortage of supplies, Morwood said.

Over the last eight years, Rotaplast doctors and nurses have done reconstructive surgery on more than 1,000 South Americans.

Members of the medical teams are always moved by the gratitude of the parents and children. It's not uncommon for the doctors to encounter children as old as 12 who have never had an operation.

In one such case, the parents were so delighted their son had been helped that they stayed in the clinic to help translate for the medical team and feed the kids, Morwood said.

Another time, a young boy — who received a bus pass and train ticket from his local Rotary Club — missed his train connection and arrived one day late. Unfortunately, the operating schedule had already filled up for the week.

"At the end of the week we took a vote and asked volunteers to stay late," Morwood said. "We stayed up until 11 p.m. to operate on that child."

Around the world

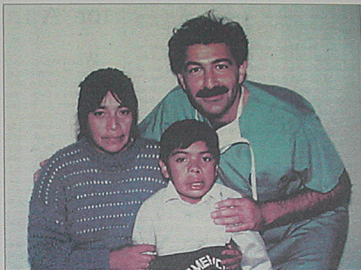
In addition to the surgeons, pediatric dentists and doctors try to educate the parents about how cleft lips and palates are passed on genetically and what preventative steps parents can take before conceiving children.

Eight years after the program started — with seed money from Rotary International and the Back Foundation — word has traveled around the world about the good work the doctors and nurses are doing.

"We've gotten invitations from the Philippines and India. We're trying to expand the program," Dr. Morwood said.

The doctors and nurses hope others will want to give the gift that dramatically improves children's lives.

"When you think that after an hour and a half of surgery they can really be living a normal life, it's just so rewarding," Geisler said.



PHOTOS/COURTESY DAVID MORWOOD

These startling before and after pictures of a Venezuelan boy illustrate how desperately some children in Third World countries need corrective surgery. Local surgeon David Morwood (pictured above with the boy and his mother after surgery) has performed numerous cleft lip and palate surgeries for South American children during the last eight years. Pictured below, a grade 21 schoolteacher and nurse keep watch as another youth recovers from surgery.

