

Rotaplast International and Alliance for Smiles

When a child's palate, lip, or both do not fuse together properly in utero, the resulting condition makes it hard for that child to eat and, later, to speak. While surgery can repair the problem, in developing countries, many children lack access to the medical care needed and face lifelong health problems and ostracism.

In 1992, members of the Rotary Club of San Francisco created a project called Rotaplast to support an annual medical mission to Chile on which volunteer doctors would surgically repair cleft lips and palates. A few years later, they began sending medical personnel to other countries, and Rotaplast International became an independent nonprofit. Rotaplast has conducted 220 missions in 26 countries, carrying out surgery on nearly

21,000 patients and providing dental and orthodontic care and speech therapy. The organization also supports education for medical personnel in host countries and the development of centers to care for patients with cleft lip and palate.

In 2004, six San Francisco club members established a second nonprofit called Alliance for Smiles, which also provides surgery as well as ongoing treatments including dentistry, orthodontia, speech therapy, and sometimes psychological counseling. To do this, Alliance for Smiles trains local health care providers and establishes treatment centers where patients can receive such care.

"Medical missions are really important, but so is education, training, and extended care of cleft lip and palate children," says Anita Stangl, a member of the

Rotary Club of San Francisco, who was the president and CEO of Alliance for Smiles from 2004 to 2016. Since 2004, Alliance for Smiles has treated more than 7,000 children.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put missions on hold. Alliance for Smiles is training medical professionals virtually, and both organizations are using the time to explore new ways to serve. Stangl says that there is a backlog of needed surgeries and that medical missions should resume as soon as travel restrictions are eased. ■

DID YOU KNOW?

Globally, about one in 700 babies are born with a cleft lip or palate.

Learn more at rotaplast.org and allianceforsmiles.org.



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