Operation Smile

June 2024

COSECSA & CANECSA Newsletter









Welcome from Melini Baruth – Senior Director, Global Medical Education

It is my pleasure to bring you the latest edition of Operation Smile's COSECSA and CANECSA newsletter, which features stories from across the region and covers many of the varied activities you have all been undertaking.

It has been a pleasure to read the many personal accounts which are featured, and I am delighted to be able to share them within our growing network of fellows. We can look back on the past six months with real pride as you have all continued your work and studies whilst taking up positions on a wide range of Operation Smile's programs.

As always, I want to thank you all for your dedication and wish those of you with forthcoming exams the very best of luck. The second half of 2024 will be as busy as the first, and I look forward to crossing paths with more of you across sub-Saharan Africa in the months to come.

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Melini Baruth

2024 Five-Year COSECSA Trainees

Meet our new Plastic Surgery Residents



Dr Hannah Bumusi is in her first year of MCS training at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital, Blantyre, Malawi. She finds plastic surgery fascinating and sees endless possibilities within the field.

Hannah has been interested in plastic and reconstructive surgery since her early days in medical school. There are only three plastic surgeons in Malawi and just two currently working in public hospitals. Once she has acquired her plastic surgery skills Hannah is excited to help with treating the unmet need in Malawi. Hannah has been following Operation Smile's work in Malawi with keen interest and is excited about the prospect of being able to join a team which brings such hope to children born with cleft lip and cleft palate. Hannah plans to serve within the public hospital sector and volunteer her time and skills with Operation Smile across Malawi once she has completed her residency.

Outside of work Hannah is a fitness trainer in her free time which also contributes to her interest in health and well-being. Her other hobbies include taking walks and singing.



Dr Anne Ndindwanimana is training at Kigali University Teaching hospital in Rwanda and is in her first year of MCS. She is an aspiring plastic surgeon and cannot wait to contribute to reconstructive surgery in her country. Anne served as a junior medical officer at Muhima District Hospital. As her teenager she believed that each human being has a responsibility to serve humanity. Anne had a distant aunt who was born with a cleft lip, and lived much of her life alone as a result. Witnessing her aunt's emotional difficulties and feelings of isolation and marginalization, Anne pledged to train as a cleft surgeon to improve the lives of others and try to restore their dignity and respect by putting smiles on their faces.



Dr Gauthier Bahizire is Congolese and is taking his year one MCS at Muhimbili National Hospital, Tanzania. His goal is to become a plastic and reconstructive surgeon when he will return to the DRC and contribute to offering quality and safe surgeries to children in need. Gauthier's passion for plastic surgery has been a driving force in his academic and professional journey. He has participated in various surgical campaigns in plastic surgery, collaborating with organizations such as Interplast Germany and 2nd Chance, and he has learnt a lot from these experiences. Gauthier says in his own words, "the scholarship opportunity provided by Operation Smile and COSECSA was the missing piece in my journey towards specializing in plastic surgery. This five-year program not only aligns perfectly with my aspirations but is also tailored to support the growth of sub-Saharan medical professionals, particularly for Congolese individuals like me. I am grateful for this opportunity".



Dr James Harelimana is in his first year MCS and is currently training at the University Teaching Hospital (CHUK) in Kigali, Rwanda. His decision to join the plastic surgery training program stems from his awareness of the low density of plastic surgeons currently in Rwanda and his desire to make a difference in the lives of patients. James's passion for surgery dates back several years to his involvement in surgical outreach campaigns, participation in seminars, attendance of national and international conference, all of which have deepened his commitment to the field. During his clerkships, James had the privilege of working closely with experienced general and plastic surgeons, from whom he imbibed the values of meticulous attention to detail and compassionate patient care within the realm of plastic surgery. James saw different patients who have benefited from skin graft/cleft repair and that helped him realize the value of reconstructive surgery.



Dr Nzosani Marcel Mansey served as a medical doctor at the Kikwit General Referral Hospital in the province of Kwilu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is excited to be on this plastic surgery training journey which he is completing in Kinshasa and dreams of the day that he will be able to return to his province and offer much needed surgical care in his community.



Dr Mwinkyeu Billy Mukonk is from Lualaba, DRC. He is currently in his first year of MCS training at the Clinic University of Kinshasa. Billy has been passionate about plastic surgery since 2014 when he experienced an Operation Smile surgical programme in Lubumbashi, and he is incredibly grateful to be part of this special group of future plastic surgeons sponsored by Operation Smile. Billy is motivated to learn the requisite knowledge and skills to help the Congolese population, especially those of his province of Lualaba. His focus is on cleft repair as well as other areas of plastic surgery, and he hopes to be able to bring hope and smiles to marginalized children.



Dr Joslin Landu served as a registered physician at the El Rapha Clinique, Democratic Republic of Congo, prior to joining the plastic surgery training program. Joslin has witnessed the limited availability of paediatric specialized medical care, particularly in the field of plastic surgery and paediatric critical care, in the DRC. Most of the time this lack of surgical knowledge and scarcity of skilled professionals leads to compromised patient safety and outcomes. Joslin firmly believes that by acquiring advanced training and knowledge through this scholarship, he can significantly contribute to improving the healthcare landscape of plastic surgery in the DRC.



Dr Dickens Kimunaga is Congolese and his training and experience as an attending physician in the ortho-traumatology department has helped him to improve his interpersonal skills, teamwork and organization skills. He is excited to develop his professional career through the plastic surgery training program and to serve the communities across the Democratic Republic of Congo.

2024 Three-Year COSECSA Trainees



Dr. Mohamed Hamis Kawambwa currently serves as a general surgeon in the plastic and reconstructive surgery unit at Muhimbili National Hospital, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Mohamed believes that it is a great honour to have secured a scholarship through Operation Smile to undertake FCS in plastic and reconstructive surgery training under COSECSA. His goals are to acquire the necessary skills to treat a range of health conditions, including cleft lip and palate, and restoring the smiles of children from his city will give him great satisfaction.



Dr Amadou SH Jallow is originally from Gambia and states that his journey towards becoming the first plastic surgeon in his country has been fuelled by the desire to make a meaningful impact on the lives of individuals, particularly the underprivileged populace in sub-Saharan Africa. Amadou is currently training in Moshi, Tanzania. His long-term goal is to establish initiatives that focus on community education, prevention, and accessible healthcare services. He is passionate about contributing to the development of sustainable healthcare solutions tailored to the unique socioeconomic and cultural context of this region. Amadou is very excited about the prospect of working with Operation Smile and in particular of contributing to its mission: We believe every child – no matter where they are born – has the right to smile.





Dr. Paulo William Itule is from Mwanza, Tanzania, and is honoured to join the COSECSA plastic surgery training programme through a scholarship from Operation Smile. Paulo is excited to acquire new skills in reconstructive surgery and will use these to help fellow Tanzanians who are living with various disabilities including cleft lip and palate. Paulo is thrilled to be involved with an organisation that he has followed for a number of years and that he sees as a global leader in cleft care



Dr Decontee Naa Wonokay is a Liberian doctor currently enrolled in the COSECSA surgical training program at the University Teaching Hospital of Kigali in Rwanda. Due to the lack of reconstructive surgery providers and training programs in her country Decontee has travelled to Rwanda in search of knowledge and skills. She recently successfully completed the MCS training program. Her training as an MCS candidate gave her the opportunity to work and interact with many plastic surgeons from different countries while participating in educational sessions and surgical outreach programs. These interactions further motivated her passion for growth in plastic and reconstructive surgery. The opportunity to pursue a fellowship in plastic and reconstructive surgery as an Operation Smile scholar has alleviated financial stress and helped her focus totally on her training. Decontee believes that this training will equip her with the comprehensive technical knowledge and skills needed to significantly impact those in need in Liberia for years to come.



Dr Geoffrey Gadiel Seusi has been working as a surgeon at Masana Regional Referral Hospital in Dar es Salaam for the past seven years. Geoffrey has been interested in plastic and reconstructive surgery since his time as a surgical resident at CUHAS University. He has great patient management skills, dedication and a good sense of humour. He is a truly gifted surgeon and will be training at Muhimbili hospital in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.



Dr Thierry Cyuzuzo shares his progress...

I'm Dr Thierry Cyuzuzo, a COSECSA MCS Resident at Kigali University Teaching Hospital in Rwanda. I'd like to share an update on my activities and progress with Operation Smile since September 2023.

Clinical Rotation

- I took a clinical rotation in the plastic surgery department from September-November 2023
- Following the completion of plastic surgery rotation I transitioned into general surgery rotation, which I took from December 2023 - February 2024.
- Following the completion of general surgery rotation, I transitioned in the intensive care unit and anaesthesia department where I remain to this day.
- To date, I have recorded 483 cases in my electronic logbook.

Courses and Externship

- I participated in a valuable course on flap dissection conducted in Huye/ Butare.
- Additionally, I had the privilege of attending different visiting professorship programs at CHUK which included microsurgery, maxillofacial surgery and cleft surgery.

Networking

- I had the opportunity to interact with visiting professors who have been a great source of inspiration and guidance throughout the program.
- I got a chance to attend and present at an academic surgical congress held in Washington and meet with a number of great surgeons at the event.
- I attended a two-week clinical observership in the USA and met many great friends on the program.

Research

- I have made good progress in data collection for my academic research projects.
- I regularly participate in meetings focused on research and clinical skills, organized by SHARE, part of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.
- I completed a certified research methodology workshop organized by COSECSA and Intuitive in TANZANIA.
- I presented my research findings at the academic surgical congress.
- I presented my preliminary data on cleft project in Tanzania.
- I completed the research courses organized by the SHARE Program.

Appreciations

- I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Operation Smile board for their unwavering support and the incredible opportunities they have provided me with to pursue my educational goals.
- I am deeply appreciative of my mentors, faculty members, professors, and colleagues who have been instrumental in my journey.
- A special thanks to Melini Baruth for her exceptional guidance and support throughout the program.

Challenges and Wishes

- At present, I am fortunate not to face any significant challenges.
- I would like to express my desire for the opportunity to collaborate with members of the Operation Smile team on our research projects, which would greatly enhance our training journey.

I remain committed to my role as an Operation Smile scholar and look forward to further growth and to contributing to the field of plastic surgery.

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A Transformative Journey: My Six Weeks Externship in India for Microsurgery. **By Dr Bright Mwafulirwa**

Embarking on a six-week externship for microsurgery in India was a decision that altered my perspective, built my skills, and enriched my professional journey. It was an immersive experience that not only provided me with invaluable plastic surgery principles but also offered cultural insights that enriched my personal growth.

I am a plastic surgery trainee from Malawi under Operation Smile sponsorship. Like every other low resource country, our health system has its limitations which limits the number of cases we get exposed to during our surgical training. With this in mind an externship to India was an ideal opportunity to expose me to the vastness of plastic surgery and to learn skills that may not be available in my local setting.

I had the privilege of staying at Ganga Hospital in Coimbatore for six weeks. Five of those weeks were dedicated to being in theatre and observing different microsurgical cases and one week of the externship was dedicated to an intensive microsurgery course. The course focused on the principles of microsurgical techniques, emphasizing precision, patience, and attention to detail. Through lectures and practice surgeries on 1mm vessels, I gained proficiency in handling specialized instruments and mastering microscopic suturing, skills that have proven instrumental in my practice since I returned home.

During my time on observations I shadowed experienced surgeons across a diverse range of cases. From nerve/tendon repairs to tissue reconstructions (free and pedicled flaps), each procedure offered a unique learning opportunity, allowing me to witness first-hand the application of theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios. The exposure to a wide spectrum of cases not only broadened my understanding of microsurgical interventions but also instilled in me a sense of adaptability and resourcefulness.

Beyond the operating theatre, the cultural immersion added a profound dimension to my experience. Exploring the vibrant tapestry of Indian culture during weekends and evenings provided moments of reflection and connection with the local community. Whether savouring aromatic and spicy food or marvelling at architectural wonders, each experience served as a reminder of the beauty and diversity of the world beyond medicine. Armed with new-found skills and a broader perspective, I returned home not only as a more competent surgical trainee but also as a more culturally enriched individual.

Looking back on my journey, I am grateful for the opportunity to have embarked on this transformative experience, which reinforced my belief in the transformative power of experiential learning and cross-cultural exchange. As I continue on my professional path, I carry with me the lessons learned and the memories cherished, knowing that they will continue to shape my growth and aspirations in the years to come.



My First Operation Smile Surgical Program

By Ivan Muphano Pascal, CANECSA Resident, DRC

My name is Ivan Muphano Pascal. I am a CANECSA resident currently training at Cliniques Universitaires de Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. My colleagues and I had the opportunity to participate in our first ever international cleft surgery program with Operation Smile in May 2023 in the bustling capital of the DRC. Little did I know that this experience would deepen my passion for anaesthesia and patient safety but also my understanding of compassion, resilience, and the power of healing.

As a CANECSA resident I witness the urgency of quality medical care firsthand. Operation Smile's mission resonated with me: to bring smiles to the faces of children born with cleft lip and cleft palate. I knew I had to be part of this transformative work, not just for the opportunity to meet seasoned medical professionals from all over the world and watch them showcase their expertise but also do my best to somehow contribute for the success of this noble mission.

The first day began with a meeting during which all of the members of the multidisciplinary team were introduced. Team anaesthesia was a blend of local anaesthesiology consultants and others from America and Sweden. The importance of patient safety above all else was emphasised to us before we began patient screening.

The clinic buzzed with anticipation. Families lined up, their hopes pinned on the promise of transformation. Our team—surgeons, nurses, and anaesthesiologists—stood ready. At the registration desk volunteers greeted each family to collect basic information. Triage nurses assessed vital signs noting any complications or allergies.

As part of the anaesthesia team I met each child. We discussed fears, allergies and anaesthesia risks. We asked about previous surgeries, medical conditions, and medications. The physical exam revealed more: the curve of a spine, the strength of a heart, the delicate palate. We listened, empathized, and documented. Parents clung to hope, trusting us with their most precious gift.

In the OR, time seemed to blur as we prepared for surgery. The teamwork was seamless—a symphony of skilled hands, precision instruments, and unwavering focus. As anaesthesiologists our role was pivotal. We ensured that each child received safe anaesthesia which allowing our talented surgeons to work their magic. The weight of responsibility was immense, yet the reward was immeasurable. I had the privilege to work along and learn from tenured anaesthesiologists including Marthy Clayman, Charlotta Rubiano, Patrick Mukuna and Foreman Mabala.

Amidst the buzz of the OR we found moments of stillness—the whispered prayers before induction, the shared smiles after extubation. Language barriers tested our communication skills, but the language of empathy transcended words. We adapted to limited resources which stretched our creativity. The long hours blurred into a tapestry of shared purpose. Each successful surgery was a triumph—a mosaic of resilience, stitched together by the hands of many.

I also spent a whole day in the recovery room along Swedish paediatric critical care specialist Dr Kristel and her charming nursing team. I had a really great experience watching the dedication and attention to detail with which they took care of the children after surgery .

The climax of the campaign was the last day when we visited the patient shelter after all the surgeries had been completed and the patients had been discharged from post-op. The patients and their caretakers singing their gratitude and dancing brought tears to my eyes, which caught me completely off guard because I am generally not an emotional person.

As I write these words I carry within me the laughter of the children, the relief of their parents, the pulse of life. My journey as an anaesthesiology resident with Operation Smile has forever etched its mark. In healing their smiles, they healed mine too.

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My experience at short-term surgical program in Milan, Italy

By Medhanit Demeke Feissa



My name is Medhanit Demeke Feissa and I currently work in Tenwek Hospital, Kenya, as a consultant plastic and reconstructive surgeon. I am on my second year fellowship of Operation Smile/COSECSA's Cleft Surgery Training Program (CSTP).

The short-term surgical program in Milan was my first international training experience with Operation Smile, which took place at Sao Paolo Hospital between January and February 2024. I had the opportunity to learn from highly experienced cleft surgeons and many other multidisciplinary team members at the comprehensive cleft care centre. I was especially impressed by the impact of orthodontic care and speech therapy in cleft patients. I learned that in orthodontics, even where there may be lack of proper appliances and materials, it was still possible to attain good results with makeshift appliances by understanding the pathophysiology of the deformities.

I met the team on the day I arrived and I joined in and observed all the patients getting evaluated. I appreciated the flow of responsibilities at the different stages of cleft care and how good communication channels significantly help with patient care. I was also very interested with their protocols and how efficient these are.

On subsequent days I was able to attend a total of six major surgeries, during which I scrubbed in and assisted on four cases, and four minor surgeries. I noted that there are different approaches to some of the procedures which was a very eye-opening experience.

Overall, I received a very warm welcome from the team and everyone was ready to share their knowledge and experiences. I am grateful appreciative of the effort that goes into providing these learning and skill-sharing occasions, and thank Operation Smile, COSECSA and for the opportunities they provide to African surgeons.



Increasing access to anaesthesia in sub-Saharan Africa's biggest country

By Sidonie Kalondero

My name is Sidonie Kalondero Soki, I am a CANECSA Resident training at Cliniques Universitaires de Kinshasa. In the beating heart of the Democratic Republic of Congo a pioneering group of residents, including myself, embarked on a transformative journey with the CANECSA. Our training at the University of Kinshasa Teaching Hospital, which commenced last year, marks a significant milestone as we are the first cohort to represent the DRC in this esteemed program.

Our journey is unique, not only because we come from cities far away from Kinshasa where qualified anaesthesia practitioners are rare, but also due to the generous sponsorship of Operation Smile. This move was not merely a change of location; it was a leap of faith into a future where quality anaesthesia could be accessible in our respective home-towns.

Operation Smile's support was instrumental in our transition. OSDRC Country Manager Alex Cimanula and his team facilitated our integration into the new environment, ensuring that we had the necessary resources and guidance to thrive in our academic pursuits.

In October last year we were honoured to be visited by a team from the college, led by the president Dr Mpoki Ulisubisya. They welcomed us to the college and encouraged us to strive for excellence.

We also have monthly online meetings with Melini Baruth as well as our local Operation Smile leadership.

Digital dialogues have been pivotal in tracking the evolution of our training, offering us a platform to voice our experiences and gain insights from global experts. The support from Operation Smile has not only fuelled our academic pursuits but has also instilled a sense of global community and purpose.

The language barrier presented us with a unique challenge, as our curriculum is in English—a second language for us Francophones. However, with the help of Operation Smile we bridged this divide. Engaging in discussions with the English-speaking cohort from Malawi via Microsoft Teams, we turned this challenge into an enriching experience, enhancing our preparation for the exams.

Despite the challenges, our journey has been replete with rewarding experiences. The highs of our residency have been moments of triumph over adversity—mastering complex anaesthesiology concepts, successfully applying them in clinical settings, and witnessing the tangible impact of our work on patient care.

Conversely, the lows have been periods of intense pressure and self-doubt, particularly as we approach our exams. The weight of responsibility and the high stakes involved can be overwhelming. Yet, it is in these moments that our collective spirit shines brightest, as we support one another and draw strength from our shared vision of improving healthcare in the DRC.











Harambee Healers

by Dr. Maadot Mihrete Woldetinsae

Harambee Healers deep within the bustling heart of a sub-Saharan city, a unique fellowship blossoms. Harambee is a Kiswahili slogan, which means pulling together or working together. In sterile operating rooms scattered across sub-Saharan Africa, a dedicated band of plastic surgery residents forge a bond as strong as the sutures they tie. We are the menders, not just of bodies, but of hope.

Our journey is a testament to resilience. We hail from various corners of the continent, each carrying the weight of a nation's underserved population. The challenges are formidable. Lack of equipment, power outages, and the constant battle against infectious diseases test our resolve. Yet, amidst the limitations, a quiet magic unfolds. We improvise, innovate, and learn from each other, and within these shared struggles, a powerful camaraderie takes root.

Beyond the technical expertise, we are becoming architects of a better future. Dreaming of establishing specialized clinics, of bringing world-class care to our country and villages. We envision a future where facial deformities corrected and burn injuries treated are not a privilege for the few, but a right for all.

Ours is a story etched not just in medical journals, but in the grateful smiles of our patients. A child, once stigmatized for a cleft lip, now beaming with new-found hope. A woman, disfigured by violence, reclaiming her confidence. These are testament to the profound impact of our chosen path.

Ours is a community bound by more than scalpels and sutures. It's a fellowship woven from shared dreams, unwavering dedication, and an unyielding love for the continent we serve. We are the healers, the visionaries, the hope-bringers and the vanguards of a new era in sub-Saharan healthcare. We are the plastic surgery residents of sub-Saharan Africa, and our story is one that deserves to be etched in the sands of time.

Asante Sana Operation Smile for providing us with scholarships and enabling us to be the Harambe healers of sub-Saharan Africa.

More highlights to share as a Woman in surgery in Africa...

By Dr Victoire Mukamitari, COSECSA MCS Trainee at Kigali University Teaching Hospital (CHUK)



It is a tremendous honour and privilege for me to reflect on my residency experience thus far for the current academic year, which commenced in January 2023. In my previous report, I outlined my experiences during Year 1 of my residency.

From December 2023, I undertook my clinical rotation in general surgery, which proved to be a valuable experience as I had the opportunity to work on various cases under supervision, greatly enhancing my skills.

During the first week of December, I was fortunate to receive a travel grant to attend the WiSA (Women in Surgery Africa) annual conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This opportunity, sponsored by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, was a highlight of my year. The opportunity was incredibly valuable as it allowed me to meet various women in surgery from Africa and hear about studies conducted in different fields. Additionally, I took full advantage of the opportunity and attended the 23rd COSECSA Scientific Conference.

In the same month, the plastic surgery department in Rwanda had the honor of hosting visiting professors from the American College of Surgeons, with a focus on acute burn care management.

Mid-February brought another honour as we welcomed visiting professors to our program, with the main topic being hand surgery. This period allowed us to work on intriguing hand cases, including trauma and congenital hand malformations.

In February again, we participated in a cadaver flap course organized by the University of Rwanda in partnership with Operation Smile. This course was incredibly insightful, enhancing our hands-on skills and boosting our confidence in the surgical field.

Overall, this year has been characterized by invaluable learning experiences and unique opportunities for professional growth. I eagerly anticipate sharing more about my journey in the coming months.

I cannot conclude without expressing my deepest gratitude to Operation Smile for their consistent support, which has greatly contributed to the smooth progression of our learning.