

PRESS RELEASE

Mpumalanga families encouraged to come forward for free cleft surgery in Mbombela this July

Individuals and families affected by cleft lip and/or cleft palate are encouraged to come forward for screening and assessment for free surgery and comprehensive cleft care in Mbombela, Mpumalanga this July.

Delivered by Operation Smile South Africa, in partnership with the Mpumalanga Department of Health, the programme will take place from Friday 24 to Sunday 26 July 2026 and aims to provide life-changing surgical care for approximately 25 patients living with cleft conditions.

Free oral health programme for children in Mbombela

In addition, on Saturday 26 July and Sunday 27 July, the Rob Ferreira Hospital dental department will run a free oral health programme with support from Operation Smile. Families with children up to 12 years of age are invited to attend on either day and receive free access to various dental services, including fillings, scale and polishes, extractions, dental restorations, fissure sealants and pulpotomies (root canals on baby teeth).

“Oral health plays an important role in the overall care journey of patients with cleft conditions and it is equally important for children throughout the broader community. By combining treatment, education and prevention, we hope to improve oral health outcomes while encouraging families to seek care early and regularly,” says Sarah Scarth, Executive Director of Operation Smile South Africa.

The cleft care journey

A specialist team of Operation Smile volunteers - including cleft surgeons, anaesthesiologists, paediatricians, nurses, dentists, speech therapists, psychologists, medical records specialists and patient imaging technicians - will travel from across South Africa to Mbombela to work alongside the Rob Ferreira surgical team. This forms part of Operation Smile South Africa’s ongoing mandate to strengthen local healthcare capacity through collaboration and skills transfer.

“Cleft conditions can affect a person’s ability to eat, speak, hear and breathe. Left untreated, they can have a significant impact on health, development, confidence and quality of life. Access to timely surgery and multidisciplinary care can be transformative, improving not only physical health outcomes but also social and emotional wellbeing,” adds Scarth.

No one knows this better than 34-year-old Promise Thembelihle Mathebula, for whom the programme's impact is deeply personal. Promise, a mother from Mbombela, received cleft surgery through Operation Smile as a child. She then saw her son Mpelo - born with a cleft lip and palate - undergo a successful lip repair during the organisation's 2024 surgical programme in Mbombela.

In 2025, both mother and son returned to the programme, where they each received palate surgery. Their story reflects the generational impact of accessible, compassionate healthcare provided by Operation Smile.

On Friday 25 July, prospective patients will undergo comprehensive medical assessments ahead of surgery, with suitability for surgery carefully determined on a case-by-case basis. Working to the highest medical standards, the teams will perform surgeries over the weekend, with patients remaining under care until their final post-operative assessment and discharge.

"We are extremely grateful for Mpumalanga Department of Health's ongoing support and collaboration to ensure this programme is a success" says Scarth.. "Alongside committed partners and donors, this enables us to deliver safe, high-quality cleft surgery while also expanding access to essential oral healthcare through the Rob Ferreira dental programme."

Individuals and families wishing to come forward for screening and assessment, or seeking more information about the process, are encouraged to contact Patient Coordinator Dakalo Maguga on 073 577 8786 or email infos@operationsmile.org

For more information, visit www.operationsmile.org.za

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Boilerplates:

Operation Smile

Operation Smile is a global nonprofit bridging the gap in access to essential surgeries and healthcare, starting with cleft surgery and comprehensive care. We provide medical expertise, training, research and care through our dedicated staff and volunteers around the world,

working alongside local governments, nonprofits, and health systems, and supported by our generous donors and corporate partners. For more information about Operation Smile, please visit: <https://www.operationsmile.org.za>