


# ANNUAL REPORT

## EVERY SMILE OPENS A NEW POSSIBILITY

Creating lasting impact for children born with cleft lip and palate in Bangladesh

Rotary Club of Box Hill Central

Operation Cleft. "Gift a smile for life"

www.operationcleft.org.au

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Operation Cleft Australia (OCA) is a humanitarian project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central. Working in partnership with Deutsche Cleft Kinderhilfe e.V. (DCKH) and skilled Bangladeshi surgeons, we help children born with cleft lip and palate in Bangladesh receive the surgery they need.

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

## Create Lasting Impact

> *"This project truly promotes the Rotary International theme for 2025/2026 – Create Lasting Impact."*

In this, the 21st year of Operation Cleft Australia, a project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central, I am pleased to advise that this project truly promotes the Rotary International theme for 2025/2026 – Create Lasting Impact.

Together with our partners, Deutsche Cleft Kinderhilfe e.V. (DCKH), another 1,859 children in Bangladesh have benefited from the surgery provided by our dedicated surgeons and their teams throughout the 2025/2026 financial year. The opportunity this provides for these children and their families to live a fulfilling, happy and healthy life would not be possible without the support of all involved.

The Board of Operation Cleft Australia congratulates the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central for its continued support, both through advocacy and financially. As a highlight for the club, it was a pleasure to have Dr Muhammad Quamruzzaman, one of the lead surgeons working with us in Bangladesh, present at a club meeting this year.

As a summary of giving for the past financial year, the Board can confirm that Rotary clubs across Australia contributed 22% of donations, with other organisations donating 14%.



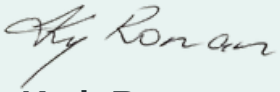
*Kath Ronan, President*

The Board would like to thank the many Rotary clubs and other organisations that have contributed to OCA. Special thanks to Children First Foundation for its continued support.

Of significant note are the individual donations made to Operation Cleft Australia, totalling 64% of all donations. We acknowledge the support that many people are providing to allow us to continue improving the lives of children.

Operation Cleft Australia and DCKH have signed a further Memorandum of Understanding, allowing this project to continue its valuable work. It is hoped that over the next three years we can further develop the Continuing Care Program, which will support speech therapy, nutrition and dental treatment for children following their surgery.

As President of Operation Cleft Australia, I would also like to acknowledge the support of our Board. Their ongoing commitment to ensuring that this project continues to restore smiles, rebuild confidence and help the children of Bangladesh is greatly appreciated.



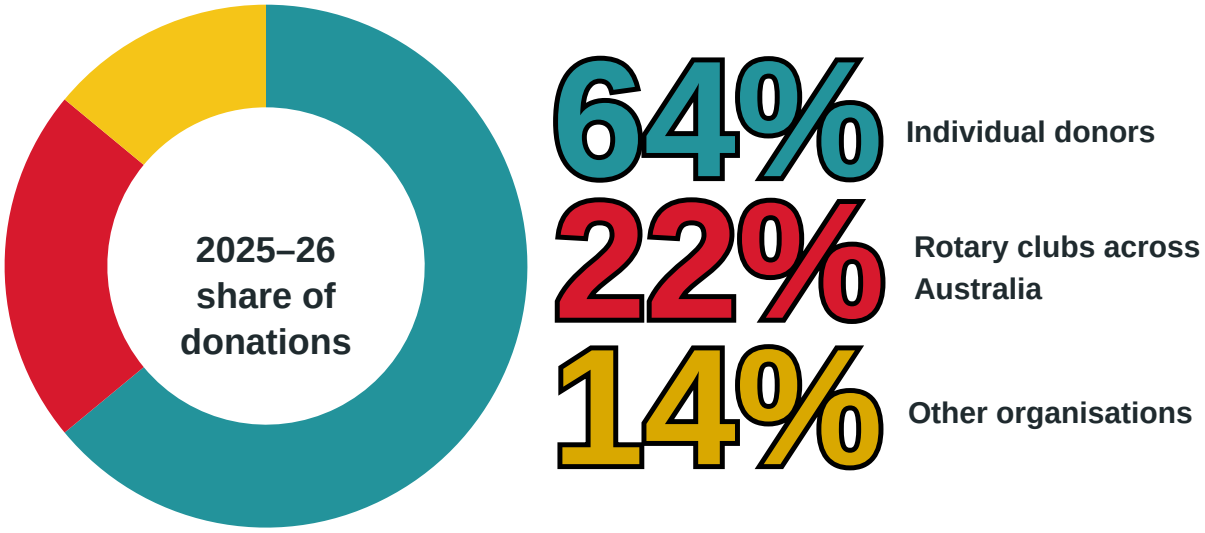
**Kath Ronan**
President
Operation Cleft Australia



# DONORS AND OUR FRIENDS

## Donations and fundraising 2025–26

Thank you to every individual, Rotary club and organisation that supported Operation Cleft Australia during 2025–26. The chart shows the share of donations received from each source.




### DONATIONS RECEIVED IN 2025–26

**$227,292**

*Year ended 30 June 2026.*
*Source: Operation Cleft Australia Foundation Profit and Loss.*

### WITH GRATITUDE

Special thanks to Children First Foundation for its continued support, encouragement and collaboration, including its encouragement in helping Operation Cleft Australia develop and strengthen its Child Safeguarding Policy. We also thank the many Rotary clubs, organisations and individual donors whose generosity allows us to keep improving the lives of children.



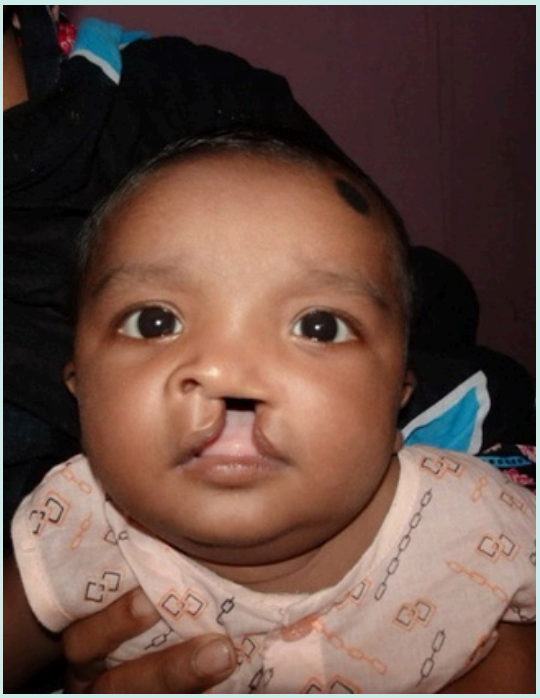
SUCCESS STORY

# A LITTLE BOY, A NEW SMILE, A FUTURE FULL OF POSSIBILITIES

*The story of Sayem Siddiki Ryan*


OCA Annual Report 2025–26 | 05

BEFORE



AFTER



*Sayem before and after his cleft surgery in July 2023. His story is shared to illustrate the lasting difference the programme makes in children's lives.*

Every child deserves the chance to smile, laugh, play and grow without barriers. For little Sayem, that chance began with an operation that changed his life.

Born in Bangladesh with a complete cleft lip and palate on the left side, Sayem faced challenges from the very beginning. A cleft can affect a child's ability to feed, develop speech and, as they grow, feel comfortable with their appearance. For many families in underserved communities, accessing specialist treatment can be difficult.

But Sayem's story took a hopeful turn.

On 20 July 2023, he was admitted to Rainbow Clinic and Diagnostics in Rangpur. The following morning, Professor Dr Muhammad Quamruzzaman performed his surgery, with Professor Dr Hasina Begum providing anaesthesia care.

Thanks to the kindness and generosity of Operation Cleft Australia supporters, Sayem received the treatment he needed.

His operation went smoothly, with no complications reported. Just one day later, on 22 July, Sayem was able to return home with his family.

Look at his photographs. One operation, and the beginning of a different journey.

Behind that new smile is something even more precious: the opportunity for a little boy to grow, learn, make friends and embrace the childhood he deserves.

Sayem's journey reminds us why this work matters. There are many more children still waiting for their chance.

## With your support, we can reach them too.

A donation today could help another child take their first step towards a new smile and a brighter future.

# OUR PROGRAMME IN PICTURES

## Surgery, care and families in Bangladesh












### Seeing the work first-hand

Visits to Bangladesh help Operation Cleft Australia see the programme in action and meet the medical teams, partners and families involved.

*Photographs from the Operation Cleft programme in Bangladesh, shared with consent.*

# SMILES TRANSFORMED

## Before and after cleft surgery



















*Children treated through the Operation Cleft programme in Bangladesh. Surgery dates vary and are not limited to the 2025–26 financial year.*



2025–2026 | KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

# PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

**1,859**
Children received cleft surgery in 2025–26

**~155**
Average surgeries per month (1,859 ÷ 12)

**200**
Surgical camps held across Bangladesh

**4,079**
Surgeries across the two-year OCA–DCKH agreement (July 2024 – June 2026)

**New MoU**
Three-year Memorandum of Understanding signed with DCKH

**Adopted**
OCA Child Safeguarding Policy, with encouragement from Children First Foundation

**21st**
Year of Operation Cleft Australia, a project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central

**64%**
Of all donations came from individual donors

*Surgery numbers from the OCA–DCKH Cleft Bangladesh case records (FY2025–26: 1,859).*

# IMPACT STATISTICS

## Year-on-year comparison

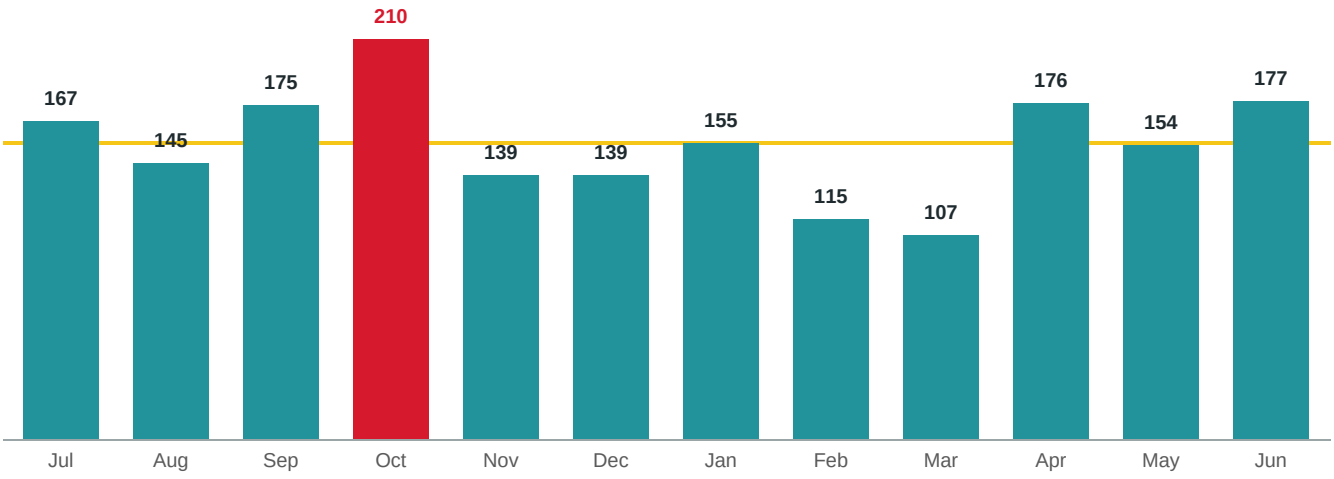
Annual figures cover the financial year (1 July – 30 June). Programme totals since 2005 are shown separately at the foot of this page.

### SURGERIES PERFORMED




**−16.3%**
change on 2024–25

### MONTHLY SURGERIES, 2025–26




*Yellow line = average of ~155 surgeries a month. October (red) was the busiest month, with 210 surgeries.*

### AT A GLANCE

| Indicator | 2024–25 | 2025–26 |
|---|---|---|
| Children receiving surgery | 2,220 | **1,859** |
| Average surgeries per month | ~185 | **~155** |
| Total donations received | $233,717 | **$227,292** |

### LONGER-TERM PROGRAMME TOTALS

**25,407**

Children who have received surgery since the programme began in 2005 (rolling total to 30 June 2026; 23,548 at 30 June 2025)

**4,079**

Surgeries across the two-year OCA–DCKH agreement (July 2024 – June 2026: 2,220 + 1,859)

*Sources: surgery numbers from the OCA–DCKH Cleft Bangladesh case records; donations from the Operation Cleft Australia Foundation Profit and Loss; programme totals as advised by Operation Cleft Australia.*

# BEYOND THE OPERATION

## A Commitment to Dignity, Compassion and Changing Lives

### By Bruce McEwen, Vice President

My formal association with the Operation Cleft Management Committee began in 2014. Since then, it has been an immensely rewarding experience to be involved in a humanitarian programme that makes such a tangible difference to the lives of children and families in Bangladesh.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to travel to Bangladesh twice. These visits gave me an invaluable opportunity to see the programme first-hand and gain a much deeper understanding of the circumstances in which many Bangladeshi families live. Through conversations with parents, children, surgeons, hospital representatives, government officials, administrators and potential donors, I gained insights that cannot be obtained simply by reading reports or reviewing statistics.

One of the things that particularly impressed me was the strength of family relationships in Bangladesh. Family members demonstrate a remarkable commitment to one another, often making considerable personal and financial sacrifices to support their relatives and contribute to their well-being. I came to appreciate that family responsibility and togetherness are deeply embedded in everyday life. This understanding also helped me recognise the enormous emotional and social challenges that families experience when a child is born with a cleft condition.

### The human reality behind cleft conditions

Cleft lip and palate are congenital conditions that can affect a child's ability to feed, speak and develop normally. Although these conditions are medically treatable, their consequences can extend well beyond the physical challenges, particularly in communities where access to treatment is limited and social understanding remains inadequate.

The World Health Organization estimates that orofacial clefts occur in approximately one in every 1,000–1,500 births worldwide. In Bangladesh, estimates suggest that more than 5,000 babies are born with cleft lip and/or palate conditions each year. Behind these figures are thousands of children and families who require timely treatment, medical support and understanding.

During my visits, with the assistance of Moinul, who translated many of the conversations, I had the opportunity to hear directly from parents about their experiences. Some of the stories were deeply distressing.

Parents described the social isolation, stigma and rejection they had experienced because their children were born with cleft conditions. I heard accounts of mothers whose marriages had broken down, with some reportedly facing divorce following the birth of a child with a cleft. Such experiences are difficult to comprehend, particularly when a mother is already navigating the emotional and practical demands of caring for her child.

The difficulties do not necessarily end as children grow older. Some children face judgement and exclusion when they enter school. They may be treated differently by classmates and, in some instances, even by teachers. Rather than being accepted and encouraged like other children, they can experience ridicule, discrimination and social isolation.

These experiences can affect a child's confidence, education, relationships and sense of belonging. No child should have to grow up feeling less accepted or less valued because of a congenital condition.

It reinforced my belief that access to cleft treatment is about much more than surgery. It is about giving children a fair opportunity to participate in society, pursue an education, develop relationships and approach their future with confidence and dignity.



*Bruce McEwen during one of his visits to Bangladesh*

## Addressing an ongoing need in Bangladesh

Bangladesh continues to face a significant challenge in providing accessible cleft treatment to every child who needs it. Although skilled surgeons and specialist hospitals provide treatment, access remains limited for many families, particularly those living in financially disadvantaged circumstances and outside major urban centres.

The cost of specialist treatment can place it beyond the reach of families who are already struggling to meet their basic needs. Consequently, many children remain untreated, while others grow into adolescence and adulthood without receiving the care they require.

The annual number of newly affected children also represents only part of the challenge. There are children and adults who have lived with untreated cleft conditions for years and continue to wait for an opportunity to receive treatment.

This is where international partnerships, charitable organisations and individual donors have an important role to play. They help bridge the gap between the availability of skilled medical professionals and the ability of disadvantaged families to access their services.

Operation Cleft Australia has been committed to addressing this need since 2005. Through its partnership with local medical professionals and organisations in Bangladesh, the programme has helped provide access to treatment for approximately 25,500 children.

This is an achievement of which we can all be proud. However, I believe we must also recognise that the need remains considerable. Every year, more children are born with cleft conditions, while many older patients continue to wait for treatment. Our responsibility therefore extends beyond celebrating what has already been achieved. We must remain committed to ensuring that the programme can continue to reach those who need it.

## The dedication of Bangladeshi surgeons

One of the most memorable aspects of my visits was the opportunity to attend surgical camps and observe the work taking place in operating theatres.

With appropriate personal protective equipment and the necessary arrangements, I was able to witness our Bangladeshi surgeons performing cleft procedures. I was genuinely impressed by their technical ability, concentration, precision and dedication.

It was remarkable to see how these highly skilled professionals, using their expertise and specialised surgical techniques, could make such a profound difference to a child's life through what may be a relatively short surgical procedure.

I also developed an even greater appreciation of the generosity of the surgeons who support Operation Cleft.

The fees paid through our programme are substantially below what comparable procedures would ordinarily cost in a commercial healthcare setting. Our ability to maintain an affordable cost per operation is, in considerable part, due to the willingness of these surgeons to contribute their professional expertise and services at highly concessional rates.

Their commitment should never be taken for granted. They are essential partners in this work, and I would like to express my sincere gratitude to every surgeon and medical professional who has supported the programme. Their contribution enables us to direct our available resources towards helping more children and families.

> ***"Their commitment should never be taken for granted. They are essential partners in this work."***

## A collective achievement built on generosity

Operation Cleft is an international humanitarian project of the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central. As a club, we feel a strong sense of ownership, responsibility and guardianship towards this programme.

However, we recognise that its achievements would not have been possible through the efforts of our club alone.

The generosity of Rotary clubs throughout Australia, together with individual donors and supporters, has been fundamental to the programme's success. Many people have recognised the difficulties faced by children with cleft conditions in Bangladesh and have chosen to make a practical contribution towards changing their circumstances.

Every contribution matters. Whether it comes from a large Rotary club, a small community group or an individual donor, each act of generosity helps make another operation possible.



*A young child with a cleft lip in Bangladesh*

I am particularly grateful to the Australian Rotary community for its continued confidence in and support of this project. Their commitment has enabled us to work alongside our Bangladeshi partners and medical professionals to deliver treatment to thousands of children who might otherwise have had little opportunity to access it.

It is important to acknowledge, too, that the cost of providing surgery has increased over time. When the programme began in 2005, the cost of an operation was considerably lower. Today, we are raising approximately AUD $400 to fund each surgery, and there may be a need to increase this towards AUD $450 in the coming years.

Inflation, rising operating expenses and wider economic pressures in Bangladesh and internationally all contribute to these changes. We must remain realistic about the financial requirements of maintaining a safe and sustainable programme. At the same time, we must continue to use donor contributions responsibly and work closely with our medical partners to keep treatment as affordable as possible.

## A commitment grounded in faith and compassion

My involvement in Operation Cleft is also closely connected to my personal Christian faith. I believe that compassion should be demonstrated through our actions and that we have a responsibility to support people who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or facing circumstances beyond their control.

The teachings of Jesus provide a clear foundation for this belief. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus teaches that acts of kindness and service towards those in need are, in essence, acts of service towards Him. Galatians 6:2 encourages us to carry one another's burdens, while the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 reminds us that compassion must extend beyond our immediate communities and personal circumstances.

These teachings resonate strongly with the purpose of Operation Cleft.

A child born with a cleft has done nothing to deserve the difficulties that may follow. No child should be judged, rejected or deprived of opportunities because of a physical condition. I believe we should look beyond outward appearance and recognise the dignity, potential and value of every human being.

For me, supporting this programme is a practical expression of those beliefs. It is an opportunity to turn compassion into meaningful action and to work alongside others who share a commitment to helping children and families.

## Looking ahead: Every child deserves an opportunity

When I reflect on my two visits to Bangladesh, I remember the families I met, the stories I heard and the surgeons I watched working with such dedication. Most importantly, I remember the knowledge that behind every operation is a child whose circumstances can be changed and a family whose hopes can be renewed.



***"No child should be judged, rejected or deprived of opportunities because of a physical condition."***

A cleft operation may take only a relatively short time, but its benefits can extend across a person's lifetime. It can improve essential functions such as feeding and speech, support healthy development and reduce some of the barriers that children face in education and social participation. For families, it can bring reassurance, renewed confidence and hope.

We should never underestimate what can be achieved when professional expertise, international cooperation, community generosity and genuine compassion come together.

Operation Cleft has demonstrated what a sustained partnership can accomplish. From its beginnings in 2005 to the thousands of children who have since received treatment, the programme reflects the commitment of people in Australia and Bangladesh who believe that every child deserves an opportunity to live with dignity and fulfil their potential.

I am proud of my association with Operation Cleft and grateful to everyone who has contributed to its work. I hope that Rotary clubs, individual donors, medical professionals and supporters will continue to stand alongside us.

There are still children waiting. There are still families who need our help. And there is still much work to be done.

For me, that is reason enough to continue.



**Bruce McEwen**
**Vice President, Operation Cleft Australia**



## THE COST OF CHANGING A LIFE:

# AUD $400 per Surgery

Approximately AUD $400 is raised to fund each cleft surgery supported through the programme in Bangladesh.

### WHY SURGERY MATTERS

A cleft lip or palate can affect a child's ability to feed and develop speech and, as they grow, how comfortable they feel with their appearance. Surgery can help improve feeding, speech development and a child's overall wellbeing.

### KEEPING SURGERY AFFORDABLE

Bangladeshi surgeons provide their professional services at highly concessional rates. Their dedication allows the programme to keep the cost of each operation affordable, helping donations reach as many children as possible.

### WHY FAMILIES NEED HELP

For many families in underserved communities in Bangladesh, specialist treatment is out of reach. Operation Cleft Australia and Deutsche Cleft Kinderhilfe e.V. (DCKH) work with local medical professionals to make treatment accessible to children who would otherwise go without.

### RISING COSTS

Inflation and increasing operating costs affect what it takes to provide each surgery. The amount needed may rise towards AUD $450 in the coming years – a possibility being monitored, not a confirmed change.

### RESPONSIBLE GIVING

Donations are used responsibly, and we work closely with our medical partners to keep treatment as affordable as possible, so the programme can keep reaching the children who are still waiting.

### WHAT DOES AUD $400 HELP COVER?

- Hospital charges
- The patient's operation
- Operating theatre costs
- Anaesthesia
- Clinical follow-up

*AUD $400 is an approximate amount per surgery, not an itemised breakdown. It does not cover all of a child's long-term cleft care.*

# A Valued Partnership with Children First Foundation

## Working together to create safer, brighter futures for children and families.

**Operation Cleft Australia wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the Children First Foundation for its continued support, encouragement and collaboration over the years.**

Our relationship with Children First Foundation has been an important part of our shared commitment to improving the lives of children affected by cleft conditions in Bangladesh. Through its generosity and support, the Foundation has contributed to our ongoing efforts to make essential surgical treatment accessible to children and families who may otherwise face significant barriers to care.

We particularly appreciate the Foundation's initiative and encouragement in supporting Operation Cleft Australia to develop and strengthen our Child Safeguarding Policy. This has helped us give greater attention to the safety, dignity, rights and wellbeing of every child involved in our programmes.

We value the Foundation's commitment to responsible charitable work and its willingness to share guidance and encourage good practices. Its support has contributed to our continued development as an organisation and reinforced our responsibility to uphold the highest standards of care when working with children.

On behalf of Operation Cleft Australia, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Children First Foundation, its leadership and supporters. We are grateful for the trust placed in our work and greatly value the relationship we have built over the years.

**Together, partnership and care help every child move towards a healthier, more confident future.**

# COMPREHENSIVE CARE PROGRAM

## Looking beyond surgery: a programme at pilot stage

The Comprehensive Care Program is at the pilot stage. Operation Cleft Australia appreciates the work being undertaken with Deutsche Cleft Kinderhilfe e.V. (DCKH), and a new three-year Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with DCKH.

The programme is currently being explored and assessed. Operation Cleft Australia will decide on its future direction at a later stage. It has not yet been approved or fully implemented.




*A mother holding a framed photograph of her child*

### WHERE THE PROGRAMME STANDS

**PILOT STAGE**

The programme is at an early, pilot stage, building on the work being undertaken with DCKH.

**BEING ASSESSED**

The programme is being explored and assessed. OCA will decide later; it is not yet approved or fully implemented.

### POSSIBLE FUTURE AREAS OF SUPPORT

*These areas are being considered for the future. They are not services currently being delivered through the programme.*

**1 Speech therapy**

Possible support for children's speech development after surgery.

FUTURE AREA

**2 Nutrition**

Possible support for healthy feeding and growth after surgery.

FUTURE AREA

**3 Dental treatment**

Possible support for children's dental care after surgery.

FUTURE AREA

## HELP CHANGE A CHILD'S LIFE

Scan the QR code to find out more and support the work of Operation Cleft Australia.

**AUD $400 helps fund one child's cleft surgery.**



# WITH THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS, SURGEONS AND VOLUNTEERS

*Operation Cleft Australia's work is strengthened by the generosity, expertise and shared commitment of our partners, surgeons, volunteers and supporters. Together, we create brighter futures for children and families.*

### Bangladeshi surgeons and medical teams

Dr Chakraborty, Dr Siddiky, Dr Quamruzzaman, Dr Imran, Dr Masum, Dr Musfiquer, Dr Sarker, Dr Shantona, together with their wider medical teams, generously share their expertise, compassion and skill to help each child receive excellent care and renewed confidence.

### Partner hospitals and clinics

The hospitals and clinics in Bangladesh provide welcoming, expert care and ongoing support, helping children access safe cleft surgery and take confident steps towards a brighter future.

### Rotary clubs across Australia

Rotary clubs throughout Australia contributed 22% of donations in 2025–26, demonstrating the strength of a united community working together to create opportunity and hope.

### Individual donors and other organisations

Individual donors gave 64% of all donations in 2025–26, with other organisations contributing 14%—a powerful demonstration of generosity, trust and shared purpose.

### Deutsche Cleft Kinderhilfe e.V. (DCKH)

Our valued international partner brings knowledge, encouragement and long-term commitment. Together, we are building a strong foundation for sustainable care and positive change.

### Rotary Club of Box Hill Central

Operation Cleft Australia is proud to be a project of the club, whose advocacy, generosity and friendship continue to make life-changing surgery possible for children in Bangladesh.

### Children First Foundation

With special thanks for its continued support and commitment to the OCA Child Safeguarding Policy, Children First Foundation helps us provide thoughtful, responsible and lasting care.

### Volunteers and supporters

Our volunteers and supporters generously share their time, skills and encouragement, helping our team deliver meaningful care and lasting positive outcomes.

### Operation Cleft Australia Board

Fellow Board Members, for their inspiring leadership, thoughtful guidance and continued commitment throughout the year.