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European Perspectives in Cardiology

Associazione Bambini Cardiopatici Nel Mondo

This Italian charity, known in English as Cardiac Children of the World, aims to help children with congenital heart disease in developing countries. Gianfranco Butera, MD, PhD, (top) and Raul Abella, MD, report on its objectives and achievements.



Every year, some 800 000 children suffering from congenital cardiopathies are born in developing countries. More than half of these have little chance of survival. These horrifying statistics are what led to the establishment of the Associazione Bambini Cardiopatici nel Mondo.

The organisation was founded in Milan in 1994 by paediatric cardiac surgeon Alessandro Frigiola, MD, San Donato Hospital, Milan, Italy, and anaesthesiologist Silvia Cirri, MD, Sant' Ambrogio Hospital, Milan, Italy (Figure 1). The driving force behind the association is a passion for helping these unfortunate children in developing countries who have congenital heart disease and for finding treatment and hope for them. These activities also strengthen the personal and professional development of the health professionals involved.



Figure 1. Dr Silvia Cirri (left) and Dr Alessandro Frigiola founded the Associazione Bambini Cardiopatici nel Mondo in 1994.



Figure 2. Celebrations were in order when the Cameroon Project to build a cardiac centre in Kumbo began in 2001.

The association has support not only from cardiac surgeons and cardiologists in Italy, but also from important centres elsewhere, including the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn; Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London, England; and l'Hôpital des Enfants-Malades in Paris, France.

The Associazione Bambini Cardiopatici nel Mondo works on several levels. Its goals are to create autonomous centres and to provide treatment in the target countries. These goals are approached by several steps that include fundraising activities, training activities for key personnel such as nurses, technicians, and doctors in Europe and in developing countries, and treatment in Italy of the most complex cardiac cases or cases in which the overseas centre has not yet gained enough experience.

In more experienced centres in developing countries, health care is provided under the supervision of the Italian team. There are also academic activities that involve participation in local congresses, the organisation of international meetings in the country, and the promotion of research projects investigating local diseases. Another important facet is the teaching of appropriate administrative skills, such as interacting with local administrators to develop management expertise and the competence to manage complex organisations such as medical and surgical cardiac centres. The supply of modern equipment is also an association objective.

Throughout the past 13 years of its existence, the association has treated >500 patients at San Donato Hospital, and > 800 children have been treated in their own countries.

Approximately 200 doctors and nurses from developing countries have been trained in Italy. One hundred fifteen major surgical missions have been carried out in various countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Palestine, Cameroon, Romania, Azerbaijan, Peru, Syria, Yemen, Kurdistan, and Mali.

At present, there are 3 main projects with which the association is involved. The first is the Cameroon Project, the start of which was celebrated in 2001 (Figure 2.) in collaboration with the Tertiary Franciscan Sisters (who have run a general hospital and a number of health centres around Kumbo, Cameroon, since 1952) and the Italian charity Cuore Fratello. The project is a programme for the development of the diagnosis and treatment of congenital and acquired heart disease in northern Cameroon.

So far, with the help of Italian benefactors, a hospital with cardiology and cardiac surgery facilities, the Shisong Cardiac Centre, is under construction near the general hospital (Figure 3). In the meantime, 3 doctors (a cardiologist, a cardiac surgeon, and an anaesthesiologist), 3 technicians, and 10 nurses are being trained in Italy. The most critical cases (about 40 children per year) are treated in San Donato. During the last 2 years, children with simpler forms of cardiac disease have been treated in their own country by the Italian team and Cameroonian doctors in training. The inauguration of the Shisong Cardiac Centre is scheduled for November 2007.



Figure 3. The Shisong Cardiac Centre is now under construction, and its inauguration is scheduled for November 2007.

The second major undertaking is the Syria Project. The association is helping the University of Damascus with the construction of a paediatric cardiological and cardiosurgical unit (Figure 4) that will be the most modern and the largest in the region. Five doctors have been trained in Italy. The unit will open in a few years.

The Peru Project is the third important activity. This project is being carried out in collaboration with Essalud, the national insurance provider of Peru. This programme started in 2003 and is due to run for 6 years. More than 300 procedures were carried out by the Italian–Peruvian team. Several Peruvian doctors and nurses trained for 6 months in Italy. Furthermore, a network of medical assistance was created; this included the opening of 3 new centres in Cuzco, Iquitos, and Arequipa. When the initial period of training and collaboration had been completed, the opening of the centres was marked by the organisation of the Symposium of the Latin

Society of Paediatric Cardiology and Cardiac Surgery in Lima in November 2006. A faculty of more than 30 high-level professionals in the field took part in this congress.



Figure 4. A paediatric cardiological and cardiosurgical unit in Damascus will be the largest such facility in the region.

The central objective of all these activities is to provide hope for the future of cardiac children in developing countries. To succeed, it is essential to extend contacts and collaboration between highly experienced professionals and other charitable associations, and to create a network of friendship between people around the world.

This is what is being achieved in Cameroon, and it is wonderfully expressed by Sister Alphonsa, the Matron of the Franciscan Sisters there. She says, “The Cardiac Centre is giving Cameroonians health and life, but also a strong sense of belonging to the wider world. The uniting force of the Cardiac Centre becomes even more amazing when considering the reality of the wars and political, social, and religious discrimination ravaging our continent. Many people have entered into our history through the gift of the Cardiac Centre, and, consequently, we are being called on to deepen our understanding of the necessity of collaboration. Indeed, the Cardiac Centre is more than a project of San Donato Hospital and the Tertiary Sisters of St Francis—it is a world concern! The relationships that have been established in the process are irreplaceable. We are making a difference in the history of the world, and it is wonderful to see, touch, feel, and actually be a part of it.”

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The logo of the Associazione Bambini Cardiopatici nel Mondo.