CASE STUDY

The plight of women with cleft lips - A case report.

Mzezewa SZ, K. Sono

1. MD, M. Med. Surg. PhD, University of Limpopo

Abstract

A 32-year-old mother of two presented to our outpatient department complaining that she was fed up of being taunted, for her lip deformity and that this has now resulted in divorce. She stated that when ever she meets new people or she attends gatherings, people stare at her and children laugh at her. She also complained that her children are taunted by other children for her deformity. She said the situation got worse a short while ago when her sisters in law taunted their brother (her husband) for marrying a wife with a cleft lip, leading to divorce. She was therefore requesting an operation to correct her deformity.

Keywords: Adult cleft lip, Divorced. Cheiloplasty, tautented, starred, remarried.

1. INTRODUCTION

Physical examination revealed an adult female with a right sided cleft lip exposing mal aligned upper teeth. Fig. 1. The palate was normal.

The rest of the examination was normal. After explaining the nature of the operation and facial changes that would alter her current physical appearance, patient was shown photos of past cleft lip operations on adults. She was told that she would have to re-do her Identification records as her face would be different. She happily agreed. Patient was referred to a clinical psychologist, and booked for an operation (cheiloplasty) in three weeks.

During the waiting period, haematology and biochemistry investigations were done. At time of operation, Haemoglobin was 11.9 g/dL, White cell count, 4.02 x 10^12/L, Sodium 139mmol/L, Potassium 3.9mmol/L, and Urea 3.9mmol/L.

FIGURE 1: Pre Operation.

Patient was starved 8 hours prior to surgery after signing an informed consent. Surgery was done under a general anaesthetic. The incision lines were tattooed as per modified Davy’s technique. The lip was infiltrated with adrenalin 1:80,000 for haemostasis. Using size 15 and 11 blades incisions were cut along the tattoo marks. Haemostasis was effected with a diathermy.
The lip was sutured with 4/0 chromic catgut on mucosa, 3/0 vicryl on the muscles and 4/0 nylon on skin. The lip was dressed with steri-strips. After surgery, patient was analgesed with pethidine at 1 mg/kg body weight 4 hourly. She was allowed to eat when fully awake, starting with liquids, soft diet and then graduating to ward diet. Wound was exposed on third day post operation. Sutures were removed on 5th day after the operation, and discharged the following day. On review day after a month, Fig. 2, patient was very happy. She reported that only her children recognised her immediately, while others said she may be her sister or cousin they had not met before. Most pleasing to her was lack of starring by the public. At the third review, patient had remarried her husband but at higher bridal fee (Lobola).

**FIGURE 2:** Post Operation.

**DISCUSSION**

Cleft lips are usually operated according to Wallace's rules of tens, that is when the baby is 10 weeks old, weighs 10 pounds, has a haemoglobin of 10 g/dL and a white cell count of 10^{12}/L. In our African environment, the cleft lip mother is accused of witchcraft and or infidelity during pregnancy, therefore in our hospital we operate cleft lip babies in the neonatal stage (2) to reduce the social pressure and stigmata on the mother.

Our patient illustrates the sad reality faced by adults with cleft lips. Taunted, starred at, problems getting marriage partners, discriminated at work and divorce. She may have not been operated in childhood because her parents may have been advised by traditional healers not to get her operated (3). Most African patients consult traditional healers first before coming to western type medicine. This case also demonstrates how the breakdown of African culture and how it can be misused by sisters in law to destroy marriages. In most African tribes, once the sister in laws (Vatte/Hahani) have accepted the bride, are expected to make sure that the marriage is a success. This they do by being counsellors for the couple and invariably protective of the bride (4). May be in this case the sister in Laws were not involved at initial stages of this marriage.

In comedy fashion, she happily remarries her husband after cleft lip repair. Marriage after cleft lip repair in adults has been reported in other studies (5) (6).

**CONCLUSION**

Adult cleft lip repair/operation is a socially life changing operation i.e. free from being stared at, taunted and free from social exclusion in marriage and at work.

The patient will have to re-do her Identification records as her face would have been altered by the operation.

Conflict of Interest: None.

The study was approved by our ethics committee (PMREC)
Acknowledgement. We would like to thank Mrs. R. Mavhungu for her valuable criticism and suggestions.

REFERENCES


The lip was sutured with 4/0 chronic catgut on mucosa, 3/0 vicryl on the muscles and 4/0 nylon on skin. The lip was dressed with steri-strips. After surgery, patient was analgesed with pethidine at 1 mg/kg body weight 4 hourly. She was allowed to eat...