

The Namibian Children's Heart Project: A new cardiac service in Africa.

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Introduction –

Until recently there were no services for Namibian children or adults with heart disease. The aim of this project, initiated by the Ministry of Health, is to develop a self sufficient, sustainable cardiac service for children and adults in this country. The Cardiac Unit was commissioned in Windhoek in October 2010 and this paper describes our 2 year experience.

Methods –

This prospective study was conducted between September 2008 and December 2010 at Windhoek Central, Christiaan Barnard Memorial and Panorama Medi-Clinic Hospitals. Patients were recruited from the Paediatric and Congenital Heart Disease and Rheumatic Heart Disease Clinics. Funding was initially provided by businessman and philanthropist Harold Pupkewitz and thereafter, by the Namibian Government.

Results –

During the 2.3 year period 71 indigent patients were referred to Cape Town for surgery or intervention. A further 20 received surgery at Windhoek Central Hospital. The age range was 3 months to 33 years, mean 8 years. Fourteen were over 18 years. Cardiac catheterization demonstrated 3 patients inoperable and 1 did not require intervention or surgery. Two patients were referred back to Windhoek for further investigation of non-cardiac disease. Of 85 patients aged 3 months to 29 years, 8 had interventional procedures and 76 heart surgery. Fourteen patients had rheumatic heart disease and 3 adults had congenital heart disease. Tetralogy of Fallot (19), ventricular septal defect (17), patent ductus arteriosus (13) and atrial septal defects (5) were the commonest congenital heart diseases. There were 2 early deaths (operative mortality 2%) and 2 late deaths. There were 8 re-operations in 6 patients. Three (3) patients needed surgery for post-operative complications.

Conclusions -

The absence of curative heart services for children has led to an older demographic with high numbers of adult survivors with congenital heart disease. It also means low numbers of children seen with critical congenital disease. This project demonstrates that goodwill, political commitment, regional cooperation and public private partnerships can together bring great benefit to indigent, previously neglected children. Furthermore they can lead to the development of self sufficient service with thus far, satisfactory results.