

A photograph of two young girls standing on a paved surface. They are wearing colorful, patterned dresses and sandals. The girl on the left is wearing a dress with a pink, blue, and white pattern and light blue sandals with a small American flag on the side. The girl on the right is wearing a dress with a blue, green, and yellow pattern and sandals with a red, white, and blue striped pattern and a small American flag on the side. The background is a paved area with green lines, possibly a playground or a walkway. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Mercy Ships in Cameroon

Orthopedic surgery for a secure step
into the future



High hopes sail into the harbor with the M/S Africa Mercy.

Racing hearts and high hopes

When hundreds of children crowd the quay in Douala, Cameroon with their parents, awaiting the signal to climb the gangway to the big white ship, it's not the thought of a cruise that makes their hearts beat faster. They eagerly board the *M/S Africa Mercy* with the hope of operations that can change their lives. Large tumors, cleft lips-palates and, above all, misshapen legs and club feet are being treated on the hospital ship during its current deployment from August 2017 to May 2018.

While similar deformities are prevented or quickly corrected with surgery in rich industrialized countries, good, affordable or free surgical treatment within reach of home is a rarity in developing

countries. The aid organization Mercy Ships has committed itself to ensuring that people of these regions have access to free high-quality health care on hospital ships. Medical experts, including surgeons, nurses and medical care instructors volunteer their services. So does Stefanie Neeb, physiotherapist and manager of the orthopedic rehabilitation program on board the *M/S Africa Mercy*.





A child's own weight can cause deformities in bones softened by malnutrition.

From misshapen bones to sound legs

The orthopedics project in Cameroon is the second tour of duty for Ms. Neeb on the *M/S Africa Mercy*. She and her team look after patients during their stay on board the hospital ship and help them to become fit again after their operations. "Most of the patients treated in the orthopedics program are children with twisted bones that may be the result of accidents, malnutrition or genetic defects. In a relatively simple operation, a child's leg can be straightened so that the bones lose their curved shape as the child grows."

The team of physiotherapists gets to work after the operation. When the little ones' legs are put into casts, they have to learn how to walk with the casts so that bones heal properly and muscle tone is maintained. "That hurts. Many children are afraid at first, but after a few days, the passageways are filled with children who stalk around on their straight legs and make lots of noise with their crutches. Some even play soccer," said the physiotherapist with a laugh. "That's not recommended, but you just can't pull the brakes on children."





On board: Quick help and lasting support

This type of holistic care in keeping with Western standards, from preliminary examinations and surgery to after care, would not be possible upon demand, given the local medical facilities and conditions.

The mobile hospital *M/S Africa Mercy* therefore takes help to those who are cut off from professional surgical treatment. With a 430-member crew, it is the largest hospital ship in the world. On board are a ward with 82 beds, X-ray and CT devices, a laboratory and

five operating rooms in which international teams perform life-altering surgery. As soon as the little patients are sufficiently fit, they are transferred to a land-based hospital ward set up by Mercy Ships, where they are looked after by local nurses until their bones and wounds are healed. In cooperation with local hospitals, other medical facilities and the Ministry of Health, Mercy Ships offers local surgeons continuing education in order to reinforce medical expertise and improve the effectiveness of the health care system in local communities.



Since 1978 Mercy Ships has been delivering medical help and long-term development cooperation to the poorest countries on Earth.



On “windswept legs” into the hearts of the crew

Ms. Neeb realized just how strong some small patients are when she met little Djazim during her first deployment in Benin. He was only four years old when his legs became deformed, leaving him unable to walk, play with the neighborhood boys or go to school. He suffered from a genetic disease known as “windswept legs”. It is not uncommon that such disabilities lead to social rejection, isolation and an uncertain future. Despite his limitations and post-OP exertions, the little boy remained energetic and, as a born entertainer, made the entire crew laugh.

“The children have such a positive attitude when they take on these challenges and seeing their pure joy gives us adults more strength. It’s an enormous gift for me to be able to help children like Djazim with my work.”

On each mission the ship stays in the harbor for several months to ensure the long-term success of the aid and the surgery. The goals are to treat as many people as possible and to make sure they get sufficient follow-up care.



“Children find a way to cope with difficult circumstances much faster than adults.”

For lofty goals against underestimated need

The surgical care crisis in many regions of Africa is underestimated. Only six percent of all operations around the world are carried out in developing countries. More people die every year from surgery-treatable conditions than those who succumb to tuberculosis, AIDS, malaria and other infectious tropical diseases combined.

Five billion people have no access to safe, affordable surgery and anesthesia during an operation. Anesthesia mortality is three times higher in developing countries than in industrialized nations. Every year 143 million additional operations are needed to save lives and to prevent or correct disabilities.

In 2015 Mercy Ships became the 50th member of the G4 Alliance, a network of non-profit organizations, academic institutions and professional associations, which works at raising political and public awareness of “the neglected surgical patient”. The alliance’s joint goal is to establish safe surgical and anesthesia care for all people and to reach 80 percent of the world’s population by 2030.

The first step has been taken with the engagement of Mercy Ships and people like Stefanie Neeb who provide practical help on board the ship and lobby for the poorest of the poor on land to ensure that they receive long-term surgical care.

For Djazim too the first step is behind him. His cast helped him and his parents to shed the fear of social stigma related to disability. He plays and scampers through the streets like any other healthy child. He’s going to school again so that one day – figuratively speaking – he will be able to stand on his own two feet.

“The changes in the small patients are much more than physical. I am grateful that I can play a part and help them and their families to take strong steps into a better future.”



seca donates to the first step

- The *M/S Africa Mercy* is on duty in Cameroon until June 2018. During the orthopedics project, more than 50 children will be operated on to correct their support and motion function or the shape of their legs and feet.
- With its donation seca supports the project in the belief that every child should have a fair chance to stand securely in life, both literally and figuratively.
- The donated funds go toward disposable and consumable medical materials, medications and compensation for local aides. A share of 1.1 % goes toward operating expenses for the ship.

More information about Mercy Ships and donation options is available at: www.mercyships.org

We wish Stefanie Neeb and Mercy Ships continued success. Ahoy!

seca gmbh & co. kg • Hammer Steindamm 3–25 • 22089 Hamburg • Germany
phone +49 40 20 00 00 0 • fax +49 40 20 00 00 50 • info@seca.com • www.seca.com

seca[®]
Precision for health