



# "IoCCA Carrying Out Sensational Surgeries For Children With Cardiac Disease In Eritrea"

Dr. Andreas Urban  
Part I

By: Yosief Hailemariam

*International teams of cardiac surgeons have continued to visit Eritrea and conduct extensive operations for Eritrean children with cardiac diseases. ARCHEMED, a German group of surgeons, is among those teams which have been very keen to come to the country with an aim of alleviating the dire consequences of cardiac disease. An excerpt of a brief interview with Dr. Andreas Urban, Pediatric Cardiac Surgeon; highlights the endeavors that have been exerted by the international medical teams, especially the ARCHEMED group. Below is the gist of his briefings about the successful cardiac surgeries they have so far carried out.*



Asmara (IOCCA). Moreover, I am the one to organize all surgery business in the center (IOCCA), look after the equipments, teach the nurses, and observe that the patients are operated in a way that they not only survive but have a normal quality of life.

**How was IOCCA came to existence?**

I was first here in Eritrea in 1997. At that time, I was asked by the late minister of health His Excellency Salihi Meaki, whether I would be able to do cardiac surgery here in Eritrea. And I saw the different operation theaters in Mekane-Hiwet and Halibet Hospitals. And I thought that this was not possible because cardiac surgery sensitive surgery. Therefore, you need good technical equipments and trained staff. And I said to him "no, I can't do cardiac surgery here, it is impossible." At that time the late minister gave us a building at the heart of Orotta Hospital and

feet and by the end of this year we will be more or less a self-sufficient center for cardiac surgery.

**What is ARCHEMED and what is its aim?**

ARCHEMED is a German NGO. It was founded in 2010 and is looking after children in need. In fact it is called 'ARCHEMED Doctors for children in need'. In Eritrea the medical care for children with severe diseases is difficult. So, we decided to come to Eritrea to mount an operation center, with international people from international countries coming to operate on Eritrean children whatever diseases they may have. Accordingly, the aim of ARCHEMED in Eritrea is indeed medical care for Eritrean children who are sick. Thus, one of the highlight of this program is open cardiac surgery. The ARCHEMED group in Eritrea comes here for two purposes; one to treat the Eritrean children who are sick with cardiac disease



**the healthcare progress in Eritrea?**

I think Eritrea is spending a lot of money to improve healthcare systems. As far as my knowledge is concerned, Eritrea has the best program of vaccination in Africa. Moreover, Eritrea has successfully reached the Millennium Development Goals ahead of 2015. So, there is commendable progress in the healthcare of Eritrea. Parallel with the overall healthcare services that have been provided in the country, the IOCCA

and as a consequence all children who had cardiac diseases died eventually. You know that with cardiac diseases Eritrean children have no future but die. Most of them die in the first two or three years of their life. So, the needs and the problems in Eritrea were so evident. Thus, decision was not very difficult to come since doing cardiac surgery means saving many lives of Eritrean children. That's why we had to do something, because we couldn't let



Dr. Andreas Urban

*Could you introduce us with yourself please?*

I am Dr. Andreas Urban. I am German and I came from Germany too. My profession is pediatric cardiac surgeon. I was the director of the pediatric German Heart Center for many years. Since I am retired, I am organizing cardiac surgery for Eritrea. In fact, I have started it early in 1997 when I was first here in Eritrea. Then, since 2002, we are performing cardiac operations on Eritrean children at International Operation Center for Children in

we renovated the building, we have changed all the old equipment with the new once and built the lab. Finally, in 2002, we succeeded in establishing a cardiac surgery center called International Operation Center for Children in Asmara (IOCCA). Then we made our first operation center for children in Eritrea with our German personnel at IOCCA. Ever since, we have slowly picked it up the number of operation per year to not less than hundred. I think we have the best equipment you can have for children at the IOCCA. In addition, we have now photovoltaic panel on the roof, so we can produce our own electricity. This is very important because in the past we had many power cuts during operations and that is dangerous to the children. Therefore, with the help of our donor partners like ARCHEMED and others we are standing on our own

My team (ARCHEMED) has about 18 professionals and they come to



Eritrea twice a year and perform open and closed operations for free. Similarly, the other three groups – two from Italy and one from Switzerland come once a year and carry out successful operations for free.

*What could you comment about*

established center for cardiac surgery in developing countries.

*What encouraged you to come to Eritrea and do cardiac surgery for the Eritrean children?*

First, I like my job (cardiac surgery in children) very much. Second in 1997, I became aware that there was no cardiac surgery in Eritrea

As a result the first step was to take Eritrean children to Germany and operate them in my center. But, taking children to Germany for operation was very expensive for it costs about fifty thousand Euros and so on. So we could not do many operations and the follow up was not good. Therefore we rather decided to invest much money in Eritrea in the new center and do cardiac surgery here in the country. Hence, coming to Eritrea and establishing quality cardiac surgery center for the Eritrean children is extremely rewarding. On top of that the new minister of Health, Her Excellency Amna Nurhussien, is supporting this project very much.

*So far, how many Eritrean children underwent surgery?*

In about a dozen years back, all the four teams together have operated over one thousand Eritrean children at the IOCCA. Half of them are operated by the German group (ARCHEMED) and the rest half by the other three groups. For instance, this year my group (ARCHEMED) has operated about 55 children. And the other three groups will operate from 45-50 patients this month. So, yearly not less than a hundred Eritrean children have been undergoing operation from cardiac disease by all the groups. That means, annually hundred Eritrean children would have died without such medical assistance lest what awaits is death. But thanks to the IOCCA team that every year many lives of Eritrean children with cardiac disease have been saved from premature death.



## ERITREA PROFILE

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