

His beautiful cause

Dr Sunil Dutt, who has been nominated for the Namma Bengaluru awards, performs facial corrective surgery for the poor for free

MANASI PARESH KUMAR

When Dr Sunil Dutt told his family that he was giving up his lucrative practice, his wife thought he had lost his mind. Dr. Sunil was an Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery consultant for a private hospital until two years ago when he decided to dedicate his services to the poor.

"My wife could not understand what was going on in my mind. She was not the only one who thought I had lost it. My colleagues and friends tried their best to convince me to give up the idea," he recalls, but nothing could change the mind of this 41-year-old. A decision more than 60 poor families will be eternally grateful for, today.

THE TURNING POINT

Dr Sunil Dutt, a nominee for the Namma Bengaluru awards this year, has performed facial corrective surgery on more than sixty patients in the last two years, absolutely free of cost!

Going down memory lane, he recounts, "It started in 1998 for me. I was a PG student at Dr Ambedkar and there was a patient who had come to us for surgery from Bombay. His name was Babu and he was about 30 years old. He had not been able to open his mouth for close to 20 years because his jaw line was literally welded together and had been living on a liquid diet almost all his life. Babu worked as a coolie, so when he was informed about the estimated cost of the procedure, he decided to forego it, simply because he couldn't afford it."

That was when the students and the department decided to "Treat him free of cost. We de-



Dr Sunil Dutt

ecided to share the expenses amongst us" Dr Dutt remembers. The incident stayed with him, propelling him to do something about it. "In my career as a private consultant, I saw that the rich were able to afford a facial correction. Now, a facial deformity in itself is quite difficult to live with, so for people who have to live with it because of financial constraints, it is almost hopeless. The superstitions that go with it make life even more miserable. And as maxillofacial surgery is categorized under cosmetic surgery, even insurance companies don't cover it in any scheme," he explains.

A TIRELESS JOURNEY

"One day, I decided that the time was right, quit my job and started working towards my goal of providing free surgery to people who cannot afford it. The only person who was happy was my daughter who

thought it was a great idea," he says, in quiet confidence. While the intention was noble, realising it was just as difficult. Sunil had to find sponsors to make it happen.

"A cleft palate surgery alone costs about Rs 11,000 and a cancer surgery goes up to Rs 23,000. People took their time to support me, but I knew I would keep going" he determinedly states. As a first step, he tied up with Sri Venkateshwarra hospital in Madivala to allow him to perform surgeries at a subsidized rate and since then, there has been no looking back. "Initially, most of the surgeries were financed by private donors I knew but I was aware that that could not go on for long. That is when Lloyd's Bank stepped in and became our benefactor. They deposit a fixed amount in our account and that helps us a lot. Private donors too continue to help us," he says.

DEALING WITH PEOPLE'S MINDSET

The doctor's day starts at 9.30 AM and on an average he operates on one patient a day. The patients are selected from the various camps conducted by Sunil and his team of five doctors and government camps. Sunil especially focuses on children with facial deformities.

"When a young child is born with a deformity, parents think it is a curse and can never be set right. We have to work towards not only healing the child but also towards dealing with the mindset of the people," he contends.

As many who work in public domain will tell you, that is the toughest task of them all. A mite of a challenge, it seems, for Dr Sunil Dutt who continues to relentlessly work on realising his beautiful dream.