

SURGICAL TEAM STEPS UP TO SAVE SOCCER STAR

When a top surgeon from Life Wilgers Hospital heard that former Banyana Banyana player Ruth Makhosi Luthuli was living with a disfiguring facial tumour, he arranged for her to receive life-saving surgery – free of charge. By **Melanie Farrell**



A life-changing surgery restored Ruth's face and energised her spirit as she hopes to coach soccer to young people again



The former Banyana Banyana football player is grateful for the excellent medical team that showed her love and care and gave her a new lease of life

Mandela Day this year was a very big day for former Banyana Banyana soccer star Ruth Makhosi Luthuli because a team of doctors, led by Maxillofacial and Oral Surgeon Dr Frits Hoogendijk, removed a large tumour from her face at Life Wilgers Hospital in Pretoria.

Ruth, a dedicated youth-development soccer coach from KwaZulu-Natal, had been living with an adenocarcinoma – a type of glandular cancer – for seven years before Dr Hoogendijk saw her.

The cancer, initially diagnosed as a jaw infection, had eaten away Ruth's upper jaw and caused a disfiguring growth. As a result, she had lost the teeth in her upper jaw and it had affected her eyesight and blocked her nose.

Ruth first noticed a swelling on the left side of her face in 2011, but her local clinic told her it was an abscess and prescribed antibiotics.

The swelling continued to grow and after visiting three different hospitals, she was finally diagnosed with an adenocarcinoma. However, the state health system was not equipped to offer her the kind of surgery that she so desperately needed.

'Get my life back'

'After seeing Ruth, I contacted Operation Healing Hands (OHH), a charity that arranges pro bono surgery for underprivileged patients,' explains Dr Hoogendijk.

Ruth, 46, who played for Banyana Banyana in three Africa Cup of Nations tournaments, says that she received a call from Dr Hoogendijk and the OHH team on 27 June this year.

'When Dr Hoogendijk told me that he would be able to operate on me I was very happy,' says Ruth. 'Now that I have had the surgery, I am feeling good and excited because I can now see that I can get my life back.'

Dr Hoogendijk and his team were able to remove the growth by removing Ruth's upper jaw and replacing it with a temporary prosthetic implant.

'It was a huge team effort, but we were also able to save her left eye and keep her nose intact,' explains Dr Hoogendijk.

'Before the operation I couldn't breathe properly and the growth affected the vision in my left eye, but when I woke

What is Operation Healing Hands?

Operation Healing Hands is a charity established in 2016 by a group of concerned doctors and medical professionals in the private sector who coordinate surgery for pro bono patients every year on Mandela Day, 18 July.

This year Ruth Makhosi Luthuli was one of 18 OHH patients who were operated on in response to Madiba's challenge: 'It's in your hands.'

Life Healthcare Group supports the OHH initiative as part of its commitment to reach out to assist those unable to afford private healthcare. Since its establishment, OHH has organised operations for those in need around the country and a number of surgeries have been carried out at Life Healthcare hospitals, including Life Eugene Marais Hospital and Life Groenkloof Hospital, both in Pretoria.

Visit www.ohhsa.net to find out more about Operation Healing Hands.

up afterwards I could breathe and see properly,' says Ruth happily.

A second procedure was carried out to replace Ruth's temporary prosthetic upper jaw with a permanent prosthetic that contains teeth. This will enable her to eat and speak normally.

'Unfortunately, as a consequence of radiation that Ruth had before I saw her, wound breakdown occurred and some of the skin in her cheekbone region had broken down, leaving a big opening on the left side of her face,' explains Dr Hoogendijk. 'Fortunately the final prosthesis replaced this lost tissue, giving her a normal facial appearance.'

Leave troubles behind

Ruth's operation, including surgery, prosthetics, hospital, aftercare, health professionals and suppliers, cost an estimated R1 million, but it was performed free of charge under the banner of the OHH programme. 'I am looking forward to getting back to soccer coaching in KwaZulu-Natal,' says the qualified coach.

Ruth, who earned the nickname 'Troublemaker' because of her ability to outwit and outplay the opposing team when she played for Banyana Banyana during the 1990s, is keen to leave her troubles behind her.

'I am hoping to be able to coach at a national level and I would like to tell Dr Hoogendijk, the Operation Healing Hands team and the staff at the hospital how much I appreciate their help and dedication,' says Ruth.

'They showed me love, care and kindness – may God bless them all.' ■



RUTH'S BEAUTIFUL GAME

Ruth Makhosi Luthuli was a professional football player known for her skill and determination on the field. She earned 48 international caps before retiring in 2005.

Passionate about teaching football to young people, Ruth started her own women's football club in her home town of Mariannhill, near Pinetown, west of Durban.

Despite the physical and emotional hardship of living with the cancerous growth, Ruth's passion for football saw her continue to coach at her club for the past seven years.

MEET OUR EXPERT



Dr Frits Hoogendijk is a specialist maxillofacial and oral surgeon. He was the first maxillofacial and oral surgeon in South Africa to enter training as a specialist in maxillofacial surgery after qualifying and practising as a medical practitioner.