The Star Monday December 4 2006



chief of childhood. On the

And just below them, forming the

inverted triangle of the human face, is

it was surrounded by the dark stitches of

surgery. A few days later, playing in his

khaki shirt and navy shorts, he said it

made him "happy" when he looked into

the mirror and saw the latest addition to

thetised once more, the surgeon pre-

pares to perform another operation on

his new nose. By tomorrow afternoon, it

will be one step closer to looking what's

nose was stencilled onto a flap of skin

partially cut away from his forehead.

The skin was then turned and taken

down over the gaping hole where his

8) was born with, was completely rav-

aged in a shack fire which also burnt off

his one arm. his hair, and the front part

of his skull. The entire surface of his

face was devastated on that day, leaving

him with barely any lips, eyes or a nose.

old baby boy whose history would be

He was a newborn then, a one month

Since then, his face has been an ever-

And, if a miracle decides to happen,

That one, the one the little boy (now

original nose once was.

melted into his skin.

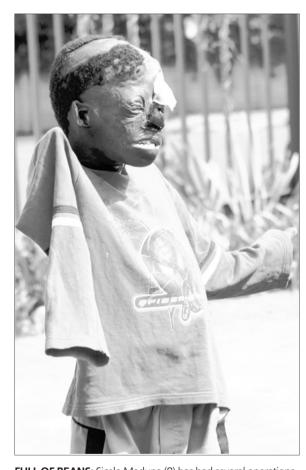
A few weeks ago, the shape of the

considered "normal" in our society.

Tomorrow, as his small body is anaes-

time, stands dead still.

'The largest insult to the human body'



FULL OF BEANS: Sicelo Maduna (8) has had several operations, and tomorrow his nose will undergo surgery once again.

profit organisations that rely on donations and the work

■ Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital has a specialised burns

■ The Smile Foundation is a non-profit organisation which

children with facial burns, cleft palates, and other facial or

cranial anomalies. To find out more, call 011-783-4177 or

provides surgical intervention to transform the lives of

of volunteers. To find out more, call 011-726-6529, 011-

482-4258, visit www.firechildren.org or e-mail

unit which treats adults and children. For more

Classifications

Superficial: sunburn without blisters; usually heals

Partial thickness: blisters, already invaded dermis, but not right through; may or may not heal itself depending on depth

Full thickness:

subcutaneous tissue, difficult to treat, remove dead tissue and replace with other skin, always needs intervention

firechildren@icon.co.za

information, call 011-933-9174.

visit www.smilefoundationsa.org

Types of injuries:

changing landscape – innumerable skin grafts, an operation to insert artificial There are many submaterial in the part of his skull eaten up categories of thermal injuries by the fire, another operation to release but the main ones are: the contracture of his lip and later the **Hot water** contracture of his eyelids, a balloon Flames: inhalation-injury insertion into his forehead to create the component (for example tissue for his new nose, and then the shack, aeroplane crash, etc) nose operation itself. Pulmonary (lungs): cuts

chances of survival he will also have a corneal transplant in significantly his eye, but right now it seems unlikely Electrical: also burns muscle - there is not enough eye lid left to cover and bones

Chemical: chemicals/acids Sicelo is one of an estimated 15 000 cause chemical reaction – South African children who survive serithermal reaction – burn ous burn injuries every year. Such statistics, however, are hard to come by, and the number could be even higher as the **Contact details** statistics were collected over the years by the Red Cross Children's Hospital Children of Fire and its associated Johannesburg School for who relied on their register of patients Blind, Low Vision and Multiple Disability Children are nonto make an estimate for the country. That

caused deliberately"

And, according to Bronwen Jones, founder of the non-government organisation Children of Fire which has taken Sicelo into its permanent care, "it is estimated that one third of these burns are

ties or anyone over the age of 12.

figure does not include the many fatali-

She says that burn injuries are mainly a result of highly complicated

socio-economic problems. "Many South Africans are living with post traumatic stress, and an awful lot of

n the one side of his face, an eye twinkles with the mis-Children who are burn survivors face a dual existence: they are just normal little other side, a forgotten marblelike sphere, hazed over by the passage of children but society struggles with their outward appearance, writes Tanya Farber Sicelo Maduna's new nose. Not long ago,

> people are very unhappy and react to injuries, few professionals want to ventheir situations in different ways," she says. "They might harm other people.

'There are unwanted children, jealous partners, and impatient 'step' parents. All these situations can lead to burn injuries. There is also burning as punishment, but people don't understand how serious a burn actually is. Then again, there is burning as learning. I have had survivors coming in with burnt hands because someone wanted to teach them how dangerous a hot plate on a stove was, for example.

"People are genuinely psychologically depressed. In a squatter camp, an altercation between two people can result in the throwing of a stove or a container of hot water. Adults know to jump out of the way, children don't. Or sometimes, inexperienced parents will sometimes leave their child on the bed next to a tub of hot water.'

ture down that path.

"It's the topic that nobody wants to work with," says Professor Psaras, "because it's exactly like working in an intensive care unit – it requires major round-the-clock dedication, and it can also be a thankless task because many die. But it is very satisfying when a child comes in with 80% burns and then sur-

One such miracle child is Dorah Mokoena (12). At the tender age of six months, she was left unattended in a cot in a wooden shack. It is believed that a burning blanket landed on her face, and as she lifted her little hands to pull it off,

they too were eaten up by the fire. After a few hospitals refused to treat her, Dorah was finally put into a ward where she would be given painkillers

until she died from her injuries. But, with her soul trapped inside her

Sicelo is a very friendly little boy. What has happened to him has made him so resilient

All these issues get entangled in the realities of poverty – lack of electricity, open flames for cooking and light, children in the care of other children while parents work or search for employment, arson, prima stoves, highly flammable closely-packed shack dwellings, a lack of awareness, no equipment to stamp out a fire that's just started.

The list is endless, and the results are recorded on the melted skin and disfigured bodies of those who survive what the Burn Foundation Australia calls "the largest insult to the human body".

Wits professor of plastic and reconstructive surgery George Psaras has performed several operations on Sicelo, the most recent of which was his nose operation on behalf of the Smile Foundation.

He says "A burn is the worst kind of injury in terms of trauma because it is both painful and deforming – aesthetically and functionally it is devastating. It can also happen to any part of the body. The more severe burns cause major harm to motor skills and development. Limbs are often lost, eye sight can be lost – there is no end to the damage a fire can cause to the human body."

But, despite the high statistics and the devastating effects of severe burn

body, she survived. When Jones met the little girl who had been abandoned, had a badly rayaged body with no hands and wore a mask of melted skin, the seeds of Children of Fire were planted.

That was more than 10 years ago. Since then, at least 200 children have undergone surgery after coming through the doors of the NGO, but it was Dorah that first captured Jones's heart. "We were just helping Dorah because

we knew her." says Jones, who first settled in South Africa from the United Kingdom 15 years ago. "The doctor said she would never

walk again. But we applied our common sense and our compassion, and now she walks beautifully even though she only began at age four. They were also going to cut out her badly burnt eyes, but we opposed any irreversible procedures." To raise money for Dorah's opera-

tions, Jones took out a full page advert in the *Times* in London, with a picture saving she was looking for a surgeon to help. "There were 2000 responses to the

advert, and within two hours, a charity bank account was set up. Dorah had 20 operations. Now, kids just turn up on the doorstep. It is mainly the indigent population and the doors are open 24-7."

The NGO has also helped about 4 000 residents at the Joe Slovo camp, while other projects it runs include fire fighting training and disaster recovery.

"It's not that we just refer the children to the surgeons, the surgeons now also refer kids to us."

For Sicelo and Dorah, their home at Children of Fire is a place where they feel integrated into a community that won't judge them for looking "different"

They are also often in the company of Feleng Mahamotse – a 4-year-old boy who was badly burnt at one month, 6year-old Anele Nyongwana and Sizwe Hlophe whose exact age is not known but x-rays have put him at around 6.

"We chose a birthday for him in January," says Jones, "on the same day as

During the day, the children are surrounded by other survivors. There are twelve children at the school that Jones has established just up the road from the Children of Fire house and office.

For them, a classmate being absent because of surgery is nothing out of the ordinary. Skull implants, prosthetic ears, surgery to toes, necks, arms, knees ...

are "events" taking place all year round. This environment is a place where nobody will stare at you because of the damage caused to your face and body.

"The children who survive burns have a problem integrating into society, and finding appropriate schools. Also, our society is not geared towards helping the disabled. As a society, we need to pay more attention, and we need to offer the best corrective surgery," says Psaras. But, prevention of fire or any other

agent of burns, is the main priority. "The media must generate awareness about this massive problem," says Psaras. "There needs to be far more education on burn prevention and safety interventions. It is really about aware-

ness and education. But, he adds, it is part of a far more complex set of problems related to the situations many South Africans live in.

"When you have no electricity, you have to light a candle. But then people leave candles next to a cot with a baby in. That's very common. As soon as people are using primus stoves and other such things, the more chance there is of people getting burnt. So, the provision of electricity in itself would greatly reduce the problem.

Unfortunately, those unaffected by burns can scarcely imagine the havoc it causes the human body.

And, in every burn situation, there are so many variables which will determine how severe it is. A damaged eyelid, for example, can lead to loss of sight because the eye is no longer protected. A loss of the lips, too, causes problems way beyond aesthetics - drooling, eating problems, and rapid tooth decay through exposure to dry air.

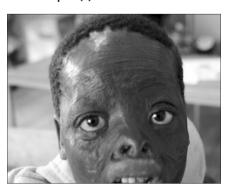
At the same time, the formation of teeth in children is affected because the



Feleng Mahamotse (4)



Sizwe Hlophe (6)



Anele Nyongwana (6)

mouth acts as a sling which helps the teeth to develop in rows along the jaw.

Facial scars, complete loss of certain features, contractures (scar tissue that pulls and deforms the face or body), loss of limbs, loss of movement caused by contractures that occur at the joints ...

All these are possible outcomes for any survivor of burns, and sadly, it is often children who are most affected. They are more likely to get burnt because they're unaware of danger, and their bodies – which are still developing – are less likely to deal with the trauma that a burn inflicts.

But there are those whose drive to survive takes them beyond the dire phys-

ical harm caused to their bodies. Speaking about little Sicelo whose face he has seen change over the years, Professor Psaras describes him as a "very friendly little boy. All that has happened to him has made him so resilient. If he was in this room, he'd pick up my phone, my glasses and my pen and he'd start playing with them and asking me a million questions. You can't contain him, he is full of beans.

