

**15<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Cleft Lip/Palate and Related Craniofacial Anomalies 20<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> October 2025**

I attended the above-mentioned international conference in Kyoto as both a presenter and an audience member. It was four days of CPD, listening to the most recent developments in the cleft field, connecting with other colleagues from different cleft teams and discussing potential future projects and collaborations.

My name is Katerina Papadopoulou – Senior Counselling Psychologist in Children’s Hospital Ireland, in Dublin. I am a clinician who has extended experience in mental health services, but for the last almost four years I have joined the national cleft service in the paediatric hospital in Ireland. The cleft service delivers medical support to patients and their families until the age of 16-17 years old. I am the first psychologist employed in the service and in charge of designing the mental health support service provided to our patients. As part of my role, I offer consultations with young people and their families as a response to difficulties and distress reported or in a preventative manner to support young people in piecing together their own narrative around living with cleft and receiving ongoing treatment.

This international conference was a unique opportunity for me to connect with colleagues from different centres as I am the only cleft psychologist in my country (Ireland) and I find online meetings useful, but often limited in their power to form connections. I was able to attend presentations from colleagues in New Zealand, Australia and Bulgaria who are also relatively new in the field and we could share our preliminary struggles and thoughts on setting up Psychology cleft services in our countries. In addition, I was lucky enough to liaise with well-established psychologists from the UK, Sweden, Norway and France who were very generous, offering their insight, but also proposing future projects to consider. It was a privilege to listen to presentations focused on projects (Operation Smile) in developing countries where mental health and psychology services within the medical system were absent, but very much needed. Different ideas, involving peer support and acceptance from the community were discussed.

In addition, I hosted my own symposium and presentation in collaboration with my Swedish colleague and I was able to offer my own reflections from my clinical practice, working with young people with cleft and my communication with the multidisciplinary team. My symposium also included the voice of a patient representative from Ireland who offered his own lived experience and learnings. My main point was trying to focus more on deliberate communication within the cleft teams and seeing the choice of words in communication with young patients and their families as an essential part of cleft care and not an optional “soft skill” for clinicians. I tried to rely on examples from my clinical practice and my aim was/is to try to encourage more young people to embrace their cleft diagnosis and be open to psychology appointments, as a source of support and booster of resilience, even before clinical distress arises.

I absolutely thoroughly enjoyed this conference and came away buzzing with excitement about what I could share with the team and also with the families I work with. I received great feedback on my presentation and I made professional connections in the field which hopefully would lead to new projects to be presented in the next international conference in 4 years in Australia. I feel more confident in my role and empowered by my colleagues who continue to search for the best way to

support psychologically young people with appearance and speech differences, while respecting their often long and chaotic medical journey and their individuality.

I am already in touch with a local cleft charity to organize an activity-based event for young people over thirteen years old with cleft, with the hope to start a supportive network outside of the hospital, utilizing/fostering peer support and community connections.

Attending this international conference made me more confident and inspired me to try different things.