



CEDARS-SINAI MEDICAL CENTER®

NEWS

8700 Beverly Blvd., Room 2429A ■ Los Angeles, CA 90048-1865
Office (310) 423-4767 ■ Fax (310) 423-0435

Media Contact: Sandra Van
Telephone: 1-800-880-2397
E-mail: sandy@vancommunications.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – MAY 20, 2004

HIGHLIGHTS:

Thanks to Liga International, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and the Larry King Cardiac Foundation, a 5-year-old boy from Mexico is recovering from lifesaving heart surgery in Los Angeles. The youngster and his mother were brought to the United States by Liga International, and his medical costs are being covered by Cedars-Sinai and the Larry King Cardiac Foundation. The needed heart valve was donated by Cryolife.

MANY “BIG HEARTS” MAKE LIFE-SAVING CARDIAC SURGERY POSSIBLE FOR BOY FROM MEXICO

LOS ANGELES (May 20, 2004) – Blessings and prayers were the currency Martin Escalante, 5, carried with him from rural Mexico for heart surgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Since birth, Martin has struggled for life. He was born with a heart defect that required two surgeries as an infant, both only temporary fixes. The boy would soon need a lifesaving intervention that parents Martin Sr. and Lupita just couldn't afford.

That's where the prayers and blessings came in. An outpouring of good wishes, goodwill and generosity from so many—family, friends, physicians, volunteers, agencies, hospital and more—have given this little boy a second shot at life. On May 17, Martin underwent a complex surgical procedure at Cedars-Sinai to replace a defective pulmonary valve and to reconstruct his pulmonary artery.

According to Wen Cheng, M.D., co-director of Pediatric Cardiac Surgery at Cedars-Sinai, the four-hour operation went very well. The surgical team reconstructed Martin's right pulmonary artery and inserted a 21mm pulmonary homograft valve to replace the little boy's defective valve. Martin is expected to leave the hospital within a week and head home to Mexico by the end of June.

“His heart started working immediately, and no medications were required to help it start beating,” Dr. Cheng explained. “His prognosis is excellent, although it's important to note that this is not a permanent solution. These valves typically need to be replaced in about 10 years. Hopefully by that time, new medical advances may offer better treatment options for him. Our priority right now is protecting his heart for the future.”

According to Dr. Cheng, such cases are not unusual. However, what was rare in this case was how long Martin had gone without the needed surgery and survived. Had he not received the operation, says Dr. Cheng, he would have died.

Martin's journey to America really began two years ago, when Liga International, a volunteer medical aid organization, was conducting its monthly clinics in Sinaloa, Mexico. Martin and his parents were among the hundreds of people who waited in the blistering sun at three Liga clinics for medical, dental and eye care. In this parched, remote region 700 miles south of the California-Mexico border, few residents have insurance,

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access to regular medical or dental care, or enough income to meet basic nutritional or health needs.

A pediatric cardiologist in Sinaloa, Dr. Paco Aguilar, brought Martin's case to the attention of Liga Vice President Richard Willner, M.D., a semi-retired cardiologist from Long Beach. Liga hoped to bring Martin to the U.S. for treatment then, but a more urgent case took precedence. Liga and Dr. Willner, who also directs their Children's Heart Fund, remained determined to find the dollars, doctors and related resources necessary to repair Martin's heart.

In stepped medical student Thomas Kleisli, who along with his fiancé and fellow student, Milagros Jacobs, are Liga volunteers who became familiar with Martin's case. Thomas was also familiar with the pediatric cardiology team at Cedars-Sinai, where he'd been doing research, and asked Dr. Cheng and pediatric cardiologist David Ferry, M.D., director, Division of Pediatric Cardiology at Cedars-Sinai, if they would donate their time to the case.

"It was fortunate because I knew whom to ask," says Thomas, who coordinates Martin's case for Liga, handling paperwork and logistics for the family, physicians and hospital. "We brought the echocardiogram and catheterization data to the hospital for the doctors to review, and they both decided to take the case."

Cedars-Sinai also agreed to offset most charges related to the surgery. The remainder, about \$30,000, is being covered by the Larry King Cardiac Foundation, which Dr. Willner contacted to request funding. Approval from the foundation was necessary before the family was allowed to leave Mexico.

The fact that Liga volunteer Milagros Jacobs' father, Fernando, is a supervisory immigration officer was another blessing. He was able to expedite the often complex and time-consuming process of entering the U.S., says Milagros, a Peru native who assists as a translator.

"It's really fun to bring the kids here," Milagros says, adding that she and Thomas help families adapt to their new surroundings. "They are very poor and this is such a blessing for them. The families are so excited to come to the U.S., but it's also a big shock. The city is so big, and there are so many cars. Their home is very rural, like desert, and with dirt roads."

Back home in El Fuerte, Martin's mother works in a clothing store and his father in a neighborhood market. The nearly six-year-old is preparing to go to school soon, according to his mother Lupita, and enjoys playing like other boys his age.

"Martin loves to play football and ride his bicycle," says his Spanish-speaking mother Lupita through her bilingual host, Juanita Ayala, who opened her home to the family for their stay in Los Angeles.

As the surgery approached, Lupita admitted to being a bit nervous, despite her great faith in the doctors and hospital. Martin is an only child and a "treasure" to his parents, Juanita adds.

"Even I was nervous," admits Dr. Willner, who looks forward to taking the youngster and his family to Disneyland after recovery. "Whenever one of my patients goes into surgery, I'm a bit apprehensive. I want them to do well. And Martin is a cute little kid."

Though there are no medical records from Mexico, Dr. Cheng and Dr. Ferry were able to piece together Martin's history from examinations and available reports. They believe Martin was born with a hole in his atrial septum, which allowed blood to leak from the left to the right chambers of the heart. He also suffered from arrested development of the pulmonary valve, which acts as "door," releasing blood to the lungs.

These conditions meant that Martin was not getting enough blood to his lungs, where it is oxygenated,

returned to the heart and then pumped to the body. Despite his high spirits, Martin was small for his age and fatigued more easily.

When Martin was an infant, doctors in Mexico performed two procedures to increase blood flow to his lungs. They inserted a Blalock-Taussig Shunt, a plastic tube placed through the right thoracic to bring blood to the lungs, and performed a pulmonary valvectomy, making an incision in the right ventricle to create a “hole” to enhance blood flow.

The problem with the valvectomy, according to Dr. Cheng, was that there was no valve to prevent backflow of blood into the heart, a situation that can eventually lead to heart failure. Dr. Cheng chose to insert a homograft, taken from a donor human heart.

In another show of generosity, this valve—valued at about \$7,000—was donated by CryoLife, Inc., the first biomedical company to commercially develop low temperature preservation of human tissues for implant in reconstructive cardiac and vascular surgeries. Nearly half of the 40,000 valves it has preserved have been implanted into children.

“The main advantage of a human heart valve over a mechanical valve is the reduced need for anticoagulant drugs,” says Joseph Schepers of CryoLife.

The surgery’s success is a great relief—and a great hope—for Martin’s friends, family and supporters.

“He is very strong and he deserves to be healthy,” says his L.A. host Juanita. “I prayed every day for God to help his little body. And his parents are very nice people. I love them all like they were my own family. I’m very blessed to be able to help.”

Martin’s mother, Juanita, extends her appreciation to the all the people and institutions that have cared for Martin. “I am very thankful to all the doctors and the hospital for helping us. I always say thanks to God because this opportunity was very big.”

Cedars-Sinai is one of the largest nonprofit academic medical centers in the Western United States. For the fifth straight two-year period, it has been named Southern California's gold standard in health care in an independent survey. Cedars-Sinai is internationally renowned for its diagnostic and treatment capabilities and its broad spectrum of programs and services, as well as breakthroughs in biomedical research and superlative medical education. It ranks among the top 10 non-university hospitals in the nation for its research activities.

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