

January 13, 2003

For Immediate Use

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Roxanne Moster, roxannem@support.ucla.edu

Amy Waddell, awaddell@support.ucla.edu

Elaine Schmidt, elaines@support.ucla.edu

UCLA Health Sciences Media Relations

(310) 794-0777

Formerly Conjoined Twins Leave UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital Anonymous donor and people worldwide contribute generously to medical expenses

(Note to Editors: For media updates after the twins leave UCLA, please call Debra Kress at the Guatemalan Pediatric Foundation at 011-502-230-4024, Healing the Children at 661-288-1957 or Sandra Munoz at FedEx Express at 901-434-8100.)

After a landmark 23-hour separation surgery on Aug. 6 and a seven-month stay at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital, formerly conjoined twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez are leaving Los Angeles Jan. 13 to return to Guatemala with their parents.

To help UCLA cover the cost for the twins' care, Cris Embleton, co-founder of Healing the Children, the nonprofit group that brought the twins to UCLA Medical Center, presented two checks to hospital officials at a farewell press conference.

The first check was a gift of \$450,000 from an anonymous donor. The second check was for \$20,652 in individual donations from people around the world wishing to contribute to the 17-month-old sisters' medical expenses.

"We deeply appreciate the outpouring of generosity and good will from every person who has contributed," said Dr. Michael Karpf, director of the UCLA Medical Center. "We want to thank Healing the Children and its extraordinary anonymous donor — as well as everyone in the community and around the world — who opened their hearts to help UCLA pay for the twins' medical care."

Accompanied by their parents, Alba Leticia Alvarez and Wenceslao Quiej Lopez, the twin girls will fly home in style, thanks to the loan of a corporate jet from FedEx Express. The private aircraft will depart from Burbank Airport and land in Guatemala City.

"In its 30-year history, FedEx has been called on to handle many special shipments," said Ken May, senior vice president, United States, for FedEx Express. "None, however, have been more precious or have touched more hearts than Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus. It is an honor for FedEx to bring the twins and their parents home to Guatemala."

Members of Healing the Children and a seven-person UCLA medical team will also share the five-hour nonstop flight. In addition to Dr. Jorge Lazareff, the lead neurosurgeon for the twins' medical team, four nurses, a pediatrician and a physical therapist will spend several days in Guatemala. The local hospital requested the UCLA team's presence to assure a smooth medical transition for the twins' new caregivers.

The twins, affectionately nicknamed the “Dos Marias,” will be taken to a private hospital in Guatemala City. The sisters will continue intensive physical and occupational therapy to improve their fine and gross motor skills and to help them overcome developmental delays caused by their previous condition.

Now that the girls are medically stable, Guatemalan therapists will be able to work with them beyond the nearly two hours of physical and occupational therapy the twins received at UCLA five days a week.

“Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa cannot be judged by the same developmental milestones as other children their age,” Lazareff said. “They did not have the same early opportunities to learn how to stand and develop other motor skills. Their brains must gradually readapt to a new reality where they function as separate persons.”

Nonetheless, UCLA physicians remain optimistic that Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus will fully recover from their dramatic surgery and lead normal lives.

“The twins have made fantastic progress,” said Dr. Henry Kawamoto, lead plastic surgeon for the twins’ medical team. “We’ve especially seen a change in Maria Teresa in the last few months. We’re sad to see the girls leave, but it will be particularly hard on the nurses who have cared for them all this time.”

In the future, Kawamoto noted, plastic surgeons in Guatemala will need to remove the skin grafts from the girls’ scalps. This will enable the twins to grow full heads of hair. The procedure may be performed at one time or done in stages.

Both girls continue to wear bandages on their heads to protect their surgical wounds during the final stages of healing. But that hasn’t stopped their parents from dressing the sisters in fancy, colorful dresses — many of them gifts from an adoring international public.

Maria de Jesus holds her head straight by herself, demonstrating that she’s developed the muscles in her head, neck and shoulders that were unused when she was joined to her sister. Previously, her head tilted to one side. She can roll over by herself, sits with little help, plays well and improves steadily.

While recovering more slowly than her sister, Maria Teresa has also improved. She can hold her head up, track movement with her eyes, turn her head from side to side to look at people and objects, and start to roll over but needs help completing the turn.

Doctors recently fitted Maria Teresa with a hearing aid to help her overcome some hearing loss that was discovered after the separation surgery. Since then, she smiles, kisses her doll, makes sounds, reacts to visitors and exhibits more of the spirit she displayed before she was separated from her sister. Doctors say it is too early to assess the degree of her hearing impairment, but are encouraged at her improvement.

“When we brought the girls to UCLA, we knew we couldn’t take them home without their smiles,” said Embleton of Healing the Children. “Both Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus have regained their smiles since the surgery, so we think it’s a good omen for a smooth trip home.”

As a research hospital, UCLA decided to accept the Guatemalan family’s case for humanitarian reasons, and to learn from the rare surgery how to teach other physicians how to care for future cases like the twins’. UCLA’s international medical staff was also eager to help.

“We had someone of every color and every continent on the twins’ clinical team,” Karpf said. “UCLA is proud to have the best medical and nursing experts from all over the world on our staff — that’s Los Angeles.”

While all of the UCLA physicians on the twins’ cases donated their services, UCLA Medical Center is absorbing the \$2 million cost for the twins’ medical care and seven-month hospitalization. The children’s parents are under no obligation to reimburse the hospital.

To recover some of its expenses, the hospital established a fund called Twins Care at UCLA. Checks payable to UCLA Foundation may still be mailed to UCLA Medical Sciences Development, 10945 Le Conte Ave., Suite 3132, Los Angeles, CA 90095.

Healing the Children also continues to accept private donations on behalf of the twins. Donations may be mailed to Box 221478, Newhall, CA 91322, or see www.healingchildren.org.

-UCLA-

January 9, 2003

For Immediate Use

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Roxanne Moster, roxannem@support.ucla.edu

Amy Waddell, awaddell@support.ucla.edu

Elaine Schmidt, elaines@support.ucla.edu

UCLA Health Sciences Media Relations

[310-267-7022](tel:310-267-7022)

UCLA Medical Team Bids Farewell to the Formerly Conjoined Twins

WHAT: Formerly conjoined twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez will leave Los Angeles to return to Guatemala with their parents on Monday, Jan. 13. Their doctors, nurses and other UCLA caregivers will say goodbye to the 17-month-old sisters and their parents at a final news conference.

WHO:

- Twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez.
- Alba Leticia Alvarez and Wenceslao Quiej Lopez, the girls’ parents.
- Dr. Jorge Lazareff, lead neurosurgeon for the twins’ medical team, director of pediatric neurosurgery.
- Dr. Henry Kawamoto, lead plastic surgeon for the twins’ medical team.
- Dr. Gerald Levey, provost of UCLA Medical Sciences and dean, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.
- Dr. Michael Karpf, vice provost, UCLA Hospital Systems and director, UCLA Medical Center.
- Dr. Edward McCabe, physician-in-chief, UCLA’s Mattel Children’s Hospital.
- Cris Embleton, co-founder of Healing the Children.

WHEN: 8:30 a.m. to 9 a.m., Monday, Jan. 13.

WHERE: Front entrance of UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital, UCLA Center for Health Sciences, 10833 Le Conte Ave. (Enter at Le Conte and Tiverton.)

VISUALS: B-roll of the twins, beta copies will be provided; X-rays of recent diagnostic tests; enlarged graphic (courtesy of the Los Angeles Times).

BACKGROUND: After a landmark 23-hour separation surgery on Aug. 6 and a seven-month stay at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital, formerly conjoined twins Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus Quiej Alvarez will leave Los Angeles. Healing the Children, a nonprofit group that helps find medical care for children in underdeveloped countries, approached Lazareff, one of the group's volunteer surgeons, for help in accepting the twins' cases. Lazareff and Kawamoto led a team of more than 50 physicians, nurses and medical staff in treating the twins' rare condition.

MEDIA CONTACT: UCLA Health Sciences Media Relations, [310-267-7022](tel:310-267-7022).

PARKING: See parking kiosk attendant at Le Conte/Tiverton hospital entrance for parking pass. Oversized TV trucks should check with the attendant before parking along the reserved spaces lining the east side of Tiverton. Do not park in the patient drop-off circle.

-UCLA-