

October 28, 2002

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

Guatemalan Twins' Return Home Delayed; New Departure Date Currently Unknown

(Note to Editors: The Oct 29 news conference has been cancelled.)

Formerly conjoined twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez will not be able to return to Guatemala Tuesday, Oct. 29, as planned, doctors at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital announced Oct. 28. Maria de Jesus has not fully healed from the last surgical procedure to clean and close her scalp incisions.

"When we inspected Maria de Jesus' scalp last week, we found a wound the size of a quarter and attached a skin graft over it," said Dr. Henry Kawamoto Jr., lead plastic surgeon for the twins' medical team. "When we rechecked her scalp on Sunday, we saw that most of the graft took. However, a small sliver of skin where the graft meets the wound remained open."

Kawamoto said his team will continue to clean Maria de Jesus' wounds and monitor the healing process for the next several days before they can judge when she will be able to leave the hospital with her family. He emphasized that the twins are progressing very well otherwise, but he wants to make certain that they are in the best possible condition before returning home to Guatemala.

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October 25, 2002

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Roxanne Moster, roxannem@support.ucla.edu

Amy Waddell, awaddell@support.ucla.edu

Elaine Schmidt, elaines@support.ucla.edu

UCLA Health Sciences Media Relations

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Formerly Conjoined Twins to Fly Home to Guatemala on Oct. 29 FedEx Express lends corporate plane for flight

(Note to Editors: New B-roll available for pickup from UCLA. Contact news wires for photos. For media updates after the twins leave UCLA, call the Guatemalan Pediatric Foundation at 011-502-230-4024.)

After a landmark 23-hour separation surgery Aug. 6 and a five-month stay at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital, formerly conjoined twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez will leave Los Angeles to return to Guatemala with their parents on Tuesday, Oct. 29. Their departure date depends on Maria de Jesus' recovery from the latest surgical procedure to clean and close her scalp incisions.

Born fused at the head, the sisters will fly home in separate seats, and in comfort — thanks to the loan of a corporate jet from FedEx Express. The express transportation company has offered the use of their corporate aircraft, which will depart from Burbank Airport and land in Guatemala City.

From the beginning, we saw the girls as two separate individuals leading their own lives," said Dr. Jorge Lazareff, head neurosurgeon for the twins' medical team. "It is hard to say goodbye, but we look forward to hearing future news about two communions, two educations, two boyfriends and two weddings."

A UCLA medical team will accompany the twins on the five-hour flight home with their parents, Alba Leticia Alvarez and Wenceslao Quiej Lopez. The team tentatively will include a pediatrician, three nurses and an occupational/physical therapist.

"The next step will be to gradually stretch the twins' scalps to eliminate the skin grafts and allow the girls to grow a full head of hair," explained Dr. Henry Kawamoto Jr., lead plastic surgeon for the twins' medical team. "This is a standard procedure and can be done by any number of excellent plastic surgeons in Guatemala."

Occupational and physical therapists at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital have been working steadily with the girls to help them overcome the developmental delays caused by their previous condition. Although the twins turn 15 months old Oct. 25, their motor skills resemble those of a 9- or 10-month-old.

UCLA physicians remain optimistic, however, that Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus will fully recover and lead normal lives. Both girls eat solid food and love soup, especially cream of potato and clam chowder. They also like riding in the hospital's child-sized red wagons and being pulled up and down the corridors.

Maria de Jesus raises one hand for "high fives" and blows air kisses. She craves attention and enjoys dropping her bottle to keep the nurses near. She can push herself up when resting on her stomach, but hasn't begun crawling. She sleeps through the night.

Although she is recovering more slowly than her sister, nurses say that Maria Teresa has improved a great deal since the surgery. She kicks her legs when placed on her belly and her muscles are less rigid. She looks at visitors when they speak to her. Because she sucks and chews slowly, she requires supplemental feedings through a nasal tube in order to consume adequate calories. She often sleeps during the day and wakes during the night.

"Since the surgery, Maria Teresa is quieter and less rambunctious," said Clarice Marsh, director of pediatric nursing at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital. "But her eyes still embrace you. Any post-surgical harm to her brain is clearly healing because she continues to improve. Aggressive rehabilitation will help this process."

The dramatic story of the “two Marias” has grabbed world attention and won the hearts of everyone at UCLA’s Mattel Children’s Hospital who encounter the smiling, dark-eyed girls.

“This is a bittersweet moment for us,” said Cris Embleton, director of the local chapter for Healing the Children, the nonprofit group that sponsored the twins’ trip to UCLA. “Our organization has a saying, ‘We fix kids’ hearts and they break ours.’ In the twins’ case, we didn’t repair their hearts, but they’ll be leaving a lot of broken hearts behind them.”

While all of the UCLA physicians on the twins’ cases donated their services, UCLA Medical Center is absorbing the estimated \$1.5 million cost for the twins’ medical care. As a research hospital, UCLA decided to accept the 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’. 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. To date, donations have fallen far short in helping to pay for the twins’ hospitalization. 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 has also raised private donations on behalf of the twins’ care. Future donations may be mailed to Box 221478, Newhall, CA 91322. See www.healingchildren.org for more details.

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