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Separated Twins Celebrate First Christmas as Individuals Due to delay in return to Guatemala, hospital staff helping family celebrate American-style

(Note to Editors: No doctors or hospital spokespersons available for interviews.)

Disappointment all around describes the delay that will prevent the formerly conjoined twins and their parents from spending Christmas in their native Guatemala. However, with so much to celebrate following their successful recovery from separation surgery, the hospital staff at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital is helping the family make the most of their holiday season.

Last week, the twins' doctors cleared Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus Quiej Alvarez for discharge. However, the Guatemalan medical team receiving the twins requested additional preparation time to ensure that the twins' care will continue in a seamless manner upon their arrival.

"We were thrilled at the idea of sending Maria Teresa, Maria de Jesus and their parents home for Christmas," said Dr. Jorge Lazareff, director of the UCLA Pediatric Neurosurgery Program and lead neurosurgeon on the twins' case.

"The doctors, physical and occupational therapists, and social workers in Guatemala City have been working very hard to arrange for the girls to come home to the best possible treatment and support system," he said. "However, they have asked us for more time to finalize their preparations. We anticipate they will be ready for the twins in January."

Dr. Lazareff noted that the 17-month-old girls are in excellent clinical condition. Maria Teresa, who had been lagging behind her sister in recovery, is now thriving. Maria Teresa has also been fitted with a hearing aid to help her overcome some hearing loss that was discovered after the separation surgery.

According to Dr. Henry Kawamoto, lead plastic surgeon for the twins' medical team, Maria de Jesus' wound from a previous grafting procedure is healing well. In fact, he feels that the girls are ready to go home at any time.

Doctors say the twins' continued progress will rely primarily on physical and occupational therapy, as well as the girls' natural growth and development. The twins will remain at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital and continue their daily therapy regimens until they return to Guatemala.

“We’re all disappointed for the family that they won’t be home for Christmas,” said Clarice Marsh, pediatric nursing director. “But, the nursing staff has really grown close to the twins and looks forward to celebrating the holidays with them. The fact that they’ve progressed this far is the best present of all.”

Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesus, who were born joined at the head, underwent a landmark 23-hour separation surgery on Aug. 6. Since their arrival in Los Angeles on June 7, the dramatic story of the “two Marias” has captured world attention and won the hearts of everyone at UCLA’s Mattel Children’s Hospital.

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