

Hospital takes on rare surgery to help baby born with four legs

March 22 2017, by Lisa Schencker, Chicago Tribune

Advocate Children's Hospital surgeons have successfully operated on a baby from Africa who was born with two spines and an extra set of legs protruding from her neck.

The hospital announced Tuesday that 10-month-old Dominique from Ivory Coast, or Cote d'Ivoire, in West Africa, is recovering well from the March 8 surgery. The baby has already started sitting up again, said Nancy Swabb, who is hosting the infant in her Edgebrook neighborhood home during the infant's recovery in the U.S.

Doctors expect she'll be able to live a normal, fully functional life. "Her recovery has been amazing," Swabb said. "Children are so resilient."

Not many hospitals have done such operations, and the surgery was the first of its kind ever performed by Advocate Children's Hospital, which has campuses in Park Ridge and Oak Lawn.

In the Chicago area, many people think of Lurie Children's Hospital in downtown Chicago as the go-to facility for complex pediatric operations. Lurie, for example, has successfully separated three sets of conjoined twins, said Lurie spokeswoman Julie Pesch.

Lurie also attracts many patients from abroad. Last year, Lurie cared for 247 patients from outside the U.S.

Advocate Children's Hospital, about 15 miles northwest of downtown,

admittedly doesn't attract many patients from abroad and may not be as well-known for complex surgeries, said Dr. Robert Kellogg, one of the five surgeons who operated on Dominique. But he said surgeons at Advocate knew they could help Dominique, whose last name was not being released at her parents' request.

Dominique was born with what's known as a parasitic twin, Kellogg said. The other twin, however, never fully developed. Only the lower half of that twin's body formed, and Dominique was born with that parasitic twin joined to her spine, Kellogg said.

Only a handful of cases like Dominique's, involving a parasitic twin attached at the spine, have ever been documented, he said.

The surgery lasted about six hours. The surgeons had to separate bone, blood vessels and nerves, Kellogg said. "It was very complicated because there were all kinds of different connections between Dominique and the twin," he said.

"While it's not something that this [hospital](#) has done before, we certainly had the confidence we could plan and perform this surgery and have a good outcome at the end," Kellogg said. "We really do have the capacity to care for these very complicated patients that have a lot of needs."

One of Advocate's surgeons, Dr. John Ruge, had a relationship with the nonprofit Children's Medical Missions West, which contacted him to see if he could help Dominique, Kellogg said. The Ohio-based organization describes itself as a nonprofit Christian organization that finds free medical care for children who can't necessary get care in their home countries. Attempts to reach the group were not immediately successful.

The organization also finds host families, such as the Swabbs, to care for children while they're receiving medical care in the U.S. Nancy Swabb

said Dominique arrived in the U.S. in early February.

Swabb said she volunteered to host Dominique after seeing a Facebook post featuring a photo of the little girl in her mother's lap. Within two weeks of seeing that Facebook post, Dominique and an escort flew from her home in the city of Abidjan to Chicago, where she met Nancy Swabb, her husband and their two daughters, ages 9 and 15.

Dominique likely will head home to her mother, father and three older sisters, who've been getting regular updates on the baby's condition, in mid-April, Swabb said. Dominique's parents weren't able to come due to cost, an Advocate Children's Hospital spokeswoman said.

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