

Big-hearted staff helps newborns

Compassionate care at Royal Columbian Hospital helps parents through trying times

By Victoria Fawkes
Special to The Post

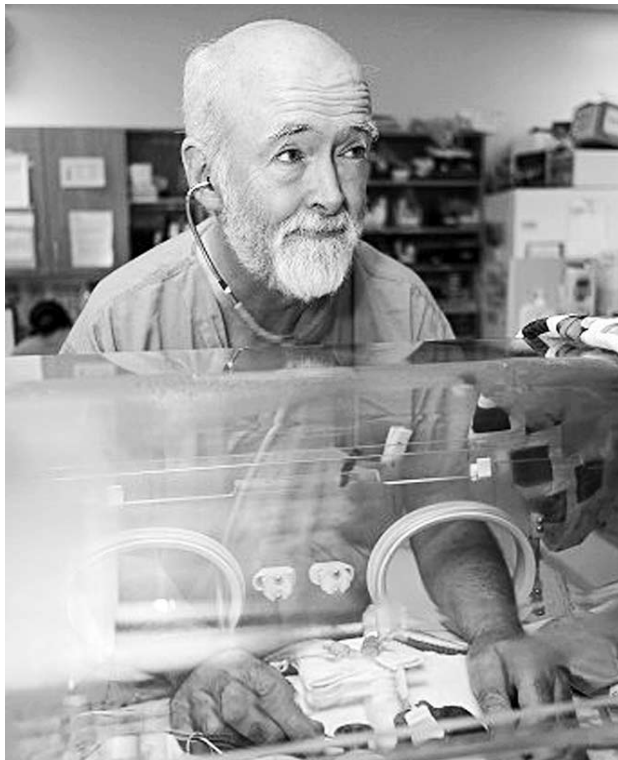
When Christine Chan found out she was pregnant with identical twins, she and her husband Travis Rose were ecstatic.

"All my life I had wanted to have identical twins, and this was a dream come true, babies number five and six, together." However, the delight of adding a set of twins to their family was short lived, when on February 7, 2012, Christine's water broke without warning. She was only 23 weeks pregnant.

"I was cooking dinner and realized my water had broken. I was so scared and I didn't know what was happening, because I knew it was much too early for me to be giving birth," said Christine.

Confusion and fear washed over her as Travis drove her to Royal Columbian Hospital (RCH), where she was admitted and stabilized. While at RCH, the high-risk maternity team tried to prolong Christine's pregnancy as long as possible in order to give her twins, Sky and Ocean, the best chance at life.

Three weeks later, Christine's worst fears happened. Ocean's heart-beat was unstable, and Christine would therefore require an immediate caesarian section. Despite efforts to save his life, Ocean was stillborn, leaving Christine and



Dr. John O'Toole



Rose Chan family

Travis devastated.

"When I first woke up after giving birth, Travis was sitting beside me. I had dreamt that Ocean had passed away. He had to tell me that it was not a dream. I didn't want to believe it."

After hearing the news, Christine was heartbroken. She credits RCH's nurses for helping her through that difficult time. "When Ocean passed away, I was so upset. The nurses I talked to supported and comforted me and told me that I had to stay strong for myself and Travis, and that I had to stay strong for Sky and my kids at home."

When Sky, Ocean's surviving brother, was ready to be visited, Christine recalls how fragile he looked. "We went to see Sky. He was tiny and



Queenie Lai

thin."

Although many would consider Sky's initial size of 1,076 grams to be impossibly small, RCH's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) is accustomed to dealing with

babies that are born extremely premature. The babies the NICU cares for can be as small as 405 grams, and are born as early as 23 weeks into pregnancy. They also care for infants that have

come to term (born between 37 and 40 weeks) that are critically ill.

Dr. John O'Toole, a neonatologist-pediatrician at RCH, notes that the size of the NICU, as well as the expertise of the staff, play major roles in helping premature babies survive. "We are the second largest NICU in the province and care for 800 babies each year," says Dr. O'Toole. "These babies are often in the hospital

for months. It's a very difficult time for parents, because the babies are surrounded by a lot of technology and they look so fragile," he adds.

Despite how frail most of the babies look at birth, Dr. O'Toole takes pride in the success that RCH continuously has treating critically ill newborns. "Our outcomes, based on the Canadian Neonatal Network, have always been in the top ten percent of nurseries for the last 15 years or more," he says. Dr. O'Toole also states that to the parents of the newborns, the true heroes are the nursing staff. "They look after the babies with every effort to make them as comfortable and supported as possible," he says.

Queenie Lai, the RCH Neonatal Intensive Care Unit health services manager, agrees with Dr. O'Toole. "We have the highest survival rate of NICUs throughout the country, and would not be able to function at the high level that we do without the great team here," says Lai. "They focus on integrated care and always involve the families so they feel like they're part of the team," she adds.

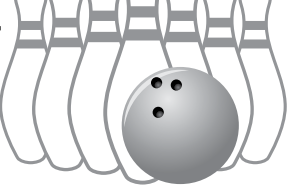
Four months later, Sky was well enough to leave RCH and go home to meet his brother and three sisters. Although the loss of Ocean is something that Christine and Travis still struggle with, Christine is comforted by memories of the supportive nurses and staff at RCH, whom she says treated her like a sister.

"There are so many people there to care for you and support you through difficult times. I am so grateful for the sensitivity and compassion I received."

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• Since 1997, the Canadian Neonatal Network has recognized RCH's Variety NICU as consistently ranking among the top in the country for achieving excellent survival rates for neonates (babies who are born before their due date) and very low rates of complications related

to prematurity.

• Royal Columbian Hospital is the only hospital in B.C. that can care for a mother and her unborn child if they are involved in a motor vehicle collision or the mother has a serious heart, renal or neurological condition that requires immediate treatment.