

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?

UWI Telehealth gives hope
to sick children



Could the President of Trinidad and Tobago have fathomed the life-changing results The University of the West Indies (UWI) Telehealth programme would bring to more than 150 children nationwide, at the launch on September 14th, 2004?

His Excellency, Professor George Maxwell Richards and his wife, Her Excellency, Dr. Jean Ramjohn Richards are patrons of the innovative health-care programme that uses two-way interactive video to provide health care services such as patient consultations as well as continuing medical education for health care professionals. Funding of the project comes from the Herbie Fund, Hospital for SickKids International Health Programme, Toronto, Canada; the Atlantic LNG Company, of Trinidad & Tobago; the Ministry of Health of Trinidad & Tobago; and The University of the West Indies.

Under the leadership of Professor Zulaika Ali and a team of highly dedicated professionals, there have been many success stories. There is five year old Brittney Ramai, who suffered from poor blood supply to her lungs (pulmonary atresia). At two weeks old, Brittney's mother, Kris, noticed her daughter's breathing was abnormal and she was diagnosed with allergies. But she progressively got worse and at 16 months a private doctor diagnosed Brittney with having a lung and heart condition known as Tetralogy of Fallot with pulmonary atresia. While reading a magazine one day, Britney's father noticed an article about the Herbie Fund. He immediately called the clinic located at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex in Mount Hope and she was evaluated by the Hospital and accepted into the programme.

In April 2008, Britney, then six years old, received successful, life-changing heart surgery at SickKids Hospital, Canada.

Professor Ali has explained that the programme, “facilitates referral consultations in sub specialized areas such as congenital diseases and child development. When a child is diagnosed with an illness, for example, a heart condition, via live two-way video conferencing with the SickKids Hospital, the child receives expert consultation from specialist doctors”.

Health care providers are recognising the potential for using this technology to enhance communication and collaboration with colleagues. In 2009, The UWI Telehealth Programme in collaboration with The Trinidad & Tobago Health Training Centre hosted four paediatric oncology specialists from Sick Kids Hospital, Toronto, Canada, from 12th -16th October, 2009. Dr. Shelia Weitzman, Director, Clinical Services Haematology/Oncology Dr. Mohamed Abdelhaleem, Head Haematopathology, Director of Molecular Haematopathology Ms. Kamla Sharma, Director of the International Patient Programme Ms. Judy Van Clieaf, Oncology RN facilitated workshops aimed at providing a greater awareness of Childhood Cancers in Trinidad and Tobago; the training of medical personnel in the clinical management of children with cancer; and the training of laboratory personnel (cytologist and pathologist) in the use of



Lesson in courage: Jacqueline Juman with daughter Natalia.

modern techniques in the diagnosis of cancer in children. The UWI Telehealth Programme in collaboration with Atlantic LNG, Trinidad & Tobago, also hosted an Advanced Burn Life Support Course of the American Burn Association a few years ago and in 2011 special lectures and training seminars have been well-received.

Jacqueline Juman, mother of Natalia Juman, who at six years old was the first recipient of paediatric care via the UWI Telehealth Programme, calls the programme “a lifeline”. Natalia was diagnosed with a complex illness which affected most of her intestines from birth. For Jacqueline, the programme is nothing less “than a miracle” and she remains thankful not only to the doctors in Canada but also to those in Trinidad. A close-knit family, the Jumans have a history of the disease that affected Natalia, and with three of her aunts passing-away as a result of the disease, the family was “hoping for the best but expecting the worst.”

The programme was not only a life-saver but it also proved cost effective, having saved the family an estimated TT\$19,000 (US\$3,166) for the initial consultation. Natalia then travelled with her mother to have surgery at SickKids, through the generous support of the Herbie Fund. This led to a saving of approximately TT\$800,000.

Today, Natalia is a happy twelve year-old studying at Holy Name Convent in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and enjoying life. She likes English literature, *Wuthering Heights* being one of her favourite books, as well as Science. On weekends she enjoys trips to the mall and Movie Towne. Over the years, she has wasted little time staying at home, playing tennis, swimming and competing in gymnastics in her free-time, as those days of intense, debilitating abdominal pain and lengthy periods of vomiting are just bad memories. Although she remembers being very “scared” before surgery at the Toronto Hospital, she also recalled that “They were really nice...the doctors said that everything is going to be o.k. - nothing is going to hurt.”

Today when you ask Natalia what she would like to be when she grows up, she smiles broadly and replies, “I want to be a doctor,” then pauses and laughs. “...but I also want to be an actress.” AWH ■

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telehealth

To learn more about the UWI TELEHEALTH programme visit: www.sta.uwi.edu/telehealth

