

In-utero operation helps deliver a medical miracle for identical twins Lucy and Polly

DOCTORS told her one of her twin babies must die, but a mother's impossible choice has a happy ending thanks to Melbourne medical mastery.

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Hiranthi Wijesinha, pictured with her identical twin girls Polly and Lucy who were saved through surgery inside their Haranthi's womb at 23 weeks. Polly weighed 1.451 and Lucy 568g at birth. Picture: Mark Stewart

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A DESPERATE bid to save unborn twins Lucy and Polly by operating inside their mother's womb has had a miraculous result.

When scans revealed one of the identical twins was failing to grow, Hiranthi Wijesinha, 42, was given the most heartbreaking of all choices: abort one girl to save the other, or risk losing both.

But a team of specialists from three Melbourne hospitals stepped in with a radical third option — though it was still long odds against the girls' surviving to birth.

Guided by a telescopic camera, the Royal Women's Dr Stephen Cole used a laser to separate placental blood vessels the girls shared so each had a more equal blood supply.

The in-utero surgery also meant that in the event Lucy died Polly, who was three times larger than her sister, would have a greater chance of surviving for an emergency birth.

After another series of emergencies, the twins were born eight weeks premature on May 6, Polly weighing in at 1451g, and Lucy a tiny 568g.

EDITORIAL: A MOTHER'S CHOICE

"It is a miraculous process they have gone through. I am very happy, and just so relieved they have each other," Ms Wijesinha told the *Herald Sun*.

"I remember the day I burst into tears when they were talking about the fact Lucy may not make it. They were talking about things like selective termination; then, the laser placenta surgery presented itself.

"It was one of those situations where I wanted Lucy to keep going and keep her living, but then there was Polly. And if it didn't happen (termination) what would happen to her?"

"In the back of my mind it was always 'Lucy is going to make it' and that dividing the placenta was going to give her the best chance, even though the doctors were saying she was probably not going to make it."

In the 16th week of pregnancy scans revealed her girls were suffering Twin Anaemia Polycythaemia Sequence, an extremely rare condition causing one twin to gain too many red blood cells, and one too few.

It's a condition the specialists at the Victorian Fetal Therapy Service — a collaboration of the Royal Women's Hospital, Monash Medical Centre and Mercy Hospital for Women to undertake in-utero surgery — have treated on only a handful of occasions, and never with a baby as small as Lucy.

With Lucy also suffering from extreme underdevelopment Dr Cole said nobody thought she would survive, and ensuring Polly was safe was a major focus of the surgery at Monash Medical Centre.

“We decided the best aim was to separate them and give each their individual chance, and in the process, we fixed the TAPS problem,” he said.

“I haven’t seen a baby with such early and severe growth restriction survive in the womb for as long as Lucy did.

“I didn’t expect her to be born alive.

“This baby just had something that kept her going when everybody else thought it couldn’t be the case.”

Even after the surgery Lucy and Polly faced a mammoth battle to be born.

An MRI scan at 31 weeks confirmed fears Lucy’s brain was not developing and that her blood flow was going into reverse.

Ms Wijesinha was admitted to hospital to prepare for a premature birth it was hoped would save Lucy, leaving her with another life and death decision.

“There was so much focus on Lucy, but I was also worried for Polly because she could have kept going for full term, and she was a little bit grumpy when she had to come out early.

“I had to discuss the palliative care for Lucy and what I would do with her when she was born. I wanted to make sure we gave her the best chance when she was born, but just because we can resuscitate doesn’t mean we should.

“I made the decision that if she did come out (not breathing) to do the resuscitation and then review what her needs were after.

“As it was, she didn’t need it, and she has just kept going. She is a fighter. She is feisty.”

A month after their dramatic birth Polly has grown to 2.3kg, is feeding and is in such good health she will soon leave hospital.

But it is Lucy who has amazed everyone. Despite her torrid time in the womb she has barely needed help breathing since she was born, has overcome a dangerous stomach infection, and has grown to 944g.

While Lucy is expected to always be smaller than her sister, Ms Wijesinha can barely believe that she has her two identical daughters at all.

“Lucy will be the feisty one, the one who will give me the most trouble when she is a teenager. Polly is very chilled and laid back. She is very relaxed,” Ms Wijesinha said.

“As Lucy has gotten bigger, she is starting to have the same look as Polly — just a mini version.

“I am absolutely amazed that they can perform that kind of surgery. I hate to think about what would have happened 20 years ago, and I’m sure when I explain it to them when they are older, they won’t believe me.”

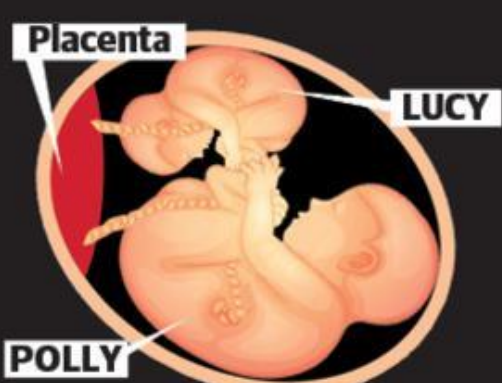


On May 6, at 31 weeks and five days, Polly is born at 2.16pm weighing 1451g



At 2.17pm Lucy is born weighing just 568g

HOW IT WAS DONE



Scans at 16 weeks show larger twin Polly is growing healthily, however sister Lucy is not developing



At 23 weeks surgeons use laser energy to burn a line down the centre of the placenta to divide its blood cells



With the placenta divided Polly is safe and grows as normal. Lucy is stabilised and gets more red blood cells until scans at 31 weeks reveal she is again struggling

TRIUMPH AFTER NERVE-WRACKING ROLLERCOASTER

IT was the day before her identical daughter's birth that Hiranthi Wijesinha became brave enough to think of the names she would give them: Polly and Lucy.

For most of the 31 weeks up to their dramatic arrival the single Richmond mum had been on a terrifying ride; one moment fearing both would be lost; then believing one may be saved; and fleetingly daring to dream that she may get to meet both.

Although she had to constantly check to make sure she could feel kicking or detect a heartbeat to ensure they were alive, Ms Wijesinha did everything she could not to become attached to her unborn girls in case the seemingly inevitable happened.

"I was too scared to name them, too scared to buy stuff and be prepared for them," she said.

The roller-coaster began when the 42-year-old went for her first routine scan at 16 weeks.

"As soon as they said she (Lucy) was small they started doing weekly scans and I just thought 'oh, she'll catch up'.

"Every Friday was nerve wracking to go in and anticipate what they would see on those scans, and each week it just became more apparent.

"It got to the point they were saying 'we don't think Lucy is going to make it' a couple of weeks before the actual operation.

"Even though Polly was growing normally, if Lucy passed away because they shared the same placenta Polly would be in danger as well.

"Obviously there were risks with the surgery because they are going through the womb and puncturing the amniotic sack — the risks were that it could rupture and I could go into labour, or that I could have a hysterectomy because I was bleeding out."

For five weeks Ms Wijesinha lived in hope Lucy would grow on her own, and was only able to face reality when Royal Women's specialists gave her the option of radical surgery which may save both.

Conscious during the operation, Ms Wijesinha can remember much of the conversations as the team fought to save her daughters.

But she is trying harder to forget weeks of panic attacks at home afterwards.

“Every week after the surgery was spent waiting to hear a heart beat, waiting to feel them kick, because one of the risks of the surgery was that I would lose them both.

“When they (nurses) came in to check the heart beat it would always be ‘please, please, please, please be a heart beat’. They found two heart beats each time.

“I would sit at home and wait for a kick, but I also didn’t want to overreact and go ‘oh my God, I haven’t felt anything’.”

After the birth Ms Wijesinha was able to see Polly straight away, and to hold her the next day.

While she was not able to see Lucy as she was immediately whisked away for specialised treatment, Ms Wijesinha was stunned and relieved that the tiny girl didn’t need the resuscitation she had painfully directed the medical team to attempt.

Now as she holds them both, the roller-coaster has seemingly stopped in the happiest of places.

“Polly is heavy, Lucy is not so much.

“Just before it all went pear shaped, I’d bought I’d bought a twin pram but then couldn’t think about it. When it arrived, I just said ‘I can’t do this at the moment’ because they called me to collect it a few days before the surgery.

“I collected it last week — it was nervously triumphant.”

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