

# Fighting to Survive:

## Inside the Neonatal Unit



A premature baby is cared for by the staff at Waco's Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center's level-three neonatal intensive care unit.

PHOTO BY JHOANNA PETERSON

Stephanie Ramirez holds her 3-day-old daughter, Michelle, in her arms while the tiny newborn sleeps in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center. Michelle was delivered five weeks early.

Ramirez knows she is fortunate to have her daughter in stable condition. Although she only weighs 5 pounds, 3 ounces, Michelle had no complications.

"The feeling you get when your child is in pain is like no other. I hurt when she hurts, so I'm glad she is OK now," Ramirez said. "I can't help but to be sad for those babies that have to remain in the NICU."

Watching babies come in and out of NICU reminded her of earlier days when she didn't know whether Michelle would pull through.

"Michelle gets to go home tomorrow," a nurse sitting with Ramirez said as Ramirez smiled. Ramirez is still holding Michelle and rocking her to sleep. Michelle then grabs Ramirez's finger with her tiny hand, the perfect picture of their

bond as mother and daughter.

Dr. Darrell S. Wheeler said, "Anything less than 37 weeks gestation is a premature baby. Forty weeks is what we call a normal term baby."

Moderately premature babies are born between 35 and 37 weeks gestation; extremely premature babies are born between 24 and 28 weeks.

For preterm babies born around the Waco community, Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center offers the only level-three neonatal intensive care unit in McLennan County. It is also home to the only board-certified neonatologist in Waco, Dr. Darrell S. Wheeler.

Since Hillcrest's NICU opened its doors in 1990, more than 4,500 babies have been treated there; before that, premature infants had to find specialized care out of town, according to Hillcrest's Web site.

"Our average census is about 15 [premature] babies a day, but we've had 24 here recently," Wheeler said.

Premature babies are required

to stay in NICU for treatment or observation. The length of time they stay depends on how early they're born. Smaller babies born at 24 weeks stay in the hospital for months, whereas a baby born after 30 weeks stays just a few weeks.



PHOTO BY JHOANNA PETERSON

Dr. Darrell S. Wheeler monitors an infant in the NICU at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center.



Heidi Hall and her mom, Dr. Mia Moody, look through pictures of Heidi as a premature baby. Moody is an assistant professor of journalism at Baylor University.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN MARTINEZ



Michelle Ramirez, five weeks premature, sleeps in the NICU at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center.



Dr. Darrell S. Wheeler examines a premature baby at the NICU.

"The earliest baby that Hillcrest can take care of is 23 weeks gestation," nurse practitioner Andrea Dossey said. "They're normally about 1 pound, and they're in NICU for about four and a half months."

Allyson Ray, a junior at Baylor, was just a few weeks older than that when she was born. At 26 weeks, Ray was in Scott & White Hospital in Temple four and a half months after birth. Ray had to be on a ventilator to assist her breathing. She was born early because doctors decided to induce labor on her mother.

"My mom was getting very sick, and so they had to take me out then or risk losing the both of us," Ray said.

The doctors told her mother that Ray would be behind mentally and slow to develop, "but thankfully, they were wrong," Ray said.

Preterm labor tends to cause several long-term and short-term complications for the newborn. Wheeler said babies who survive a preterm birth face the risk of serious lifelong health problems including cerebral palsy, blindness, learning disabilities, hearing loss and other chronic conditions.

Samir Alabsi, author of *A Primer on Premies*, discussed some common problems caused by a preterm birth: low birth weight, underdeveloped organs, intraventricular hemorrhaging, apnea, infection, respiratory distress syndrome and even death.

Intraventricular hemorrhaging, or bleeding in the brain, is one of the most common problems caused by preterm birth. Arlene Eisenberg, author of *What to Expect the First Year*, wrote that intraventricular hemorrhaging strikes 15 to 20 percent of premature babies weighing less than 3 pounds, 5 ounces "most often within the first 72 hours of life." There are four levels of intraventricular hemorrhaging, from really mild to very severe.

"The kids with grades three or four grow up to have significant cerebral palsy," Wheeler said.

Infection in premature babies is a big threat because they're less able than full-term infants to fight germs that can cause serious illness, Dossey said.

Wheeler said he advocates breastfeeding to help fight infection.

Premature babies who are 23 or 24

weeks old often have breathing complications that full-term babies don't typically face.

"Their lungs aren't developed, so we have to get them through that phase first. They have to survive that," Wheeler said.

Underdeveloped lungs can lead to respiratory distress syndrome, or RDS.

Dr. Mia Moody, assistant professor of journalism at Baylor University, is familiar with RDS. Her daughter, Heidi, developed the syndrome after a premature birth.

Heidi was born two and a half months early and weighed 3 pounds, 5 ounces. After she was born, she remained at Hillcrest's NICU for about five weeks because of complications. When she was 5 months old, she was hospitalized with the respiratory syndrome, Moody said. Like any loving mother, Moody was worried about her daughter's health. Heidi, now 17, remembers her mother telling her the story.

"She said I was in there for a long time, and they had me hooked up to needles," she said.

Doctors had predicted Heidi would have vision problems in the long term, but according to Moody, her vision is very good. Heidi is happy and healthy with little resemblance to the tiny baby born premature.

After Heidi's preterm birth, Moody's doctor was able to take better precautions during her other two pregnancies. Although her sons, Timothy and William, were also born premature, she was able to carry them longer.

There are many reasons women go into preterm labor, though they can vary greatly among women and are not easily predicted.

"Sometimes moms have medical conditions where it's too dangerous to continue the pregnancy," neonatologist Wheeler said. "At some point the obstetrician weighs the risk of delivering a little bit early versus the risk of continuing the pregnancy to term."

"Sometimes, they'll deliver a little early so mom isn't in the risk of dying."

Harvey Alvarez, a former Baylor student, was born five weeks early. Because he was tangled in the umbilical cord, doctors induced labor early. Although Alvarez had no complications,

he was kept in the hospital three weeks for observation.

His mother, Janie Garcia, remembers being afraid for her child and said it is something she will never forget.

"I just felt so helpless. I couldn't do anything but cry. I became so anxious about the situation that I couldn't even think straight," she said. "Unless someone experiences it, they can't understand the pain and anguish a mother goes through when her son is fighting for his life, and she has no idea what the outcome will be."

From the reasons that are known to cause preterm labor, the most common ones are infection and gestational diabetes.

Wheeler emphasized the importance of having good obstetrical visits. He said that if a woman develops signs of preterm labor, she should go to the hospital instead of waiting. If she shows up early, there are medicines that doctors can give her to slow down labor. But once she's dilated, it can't be reversed.

Robert Sandoval's daughter, Emily, was born a month and a half premature. Sandoval believes his wife delivered early because she didn't go to the hospital right after contractions began.

"She figured that it was nothing since it wasn't her due date," he said.

Emily was in the hospital for several weeks, her parents growing more and more eager to take her home.

"My heart was in pieces, and I was in pain because I wanted to bring her home

and couldn't," Sandoval said.

He expressed his overwhelming feelings of anger, frustration and panic. He said a big part of his heart was in the hospital with his daughter.

"I was worried, and I kept trying to tell myself it would be OK. It's hard to do that when your child is in such a fragile condition," he said.

Sandoval said Emily, at 14 months, is growing up to be a healthy child.

"I feel so blessed that she is a healthy

being born premature and have their entire future ahead of them. Many premature babies, however, lose that battle. Healthcare professionals said that by raising awareness and informing people about ways to reduce the risk of having a premature baby, the number of preterm births may decrease.

For pregnant women, reducing the risk can be accomplished by following the doctor's orders and knowing their own bodies. Doctors advise that expect-

PHOTO BY JHOANNA PETERSON



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Dr. Darrell S. Wheeler holds the hand of a premature baby in the NICU at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center.

and happy baby, and I couldn't ask for anything else," he said.

For families who have had a premature baby, lost a premature baby or now have their premature baby in the hospital, support groups can help them cope. Currently, there are no support groups in Waco dedicated to premature babies, but there are online support groups and nonprofit organizations such as Parents of Premature Babies Inc. that provide information and encouragement to families.

Some babies survive the obstacle of

ing mothers go to all their scheduled doctor's appointments and tell their doctors if they are having any symptoms that may concern them. These signs are sometimes early warnings. Doctors may be able to deal with problems if they're caught early, increasing the chances of having a healthy full term baby.

"After all, children are our future," Sandoval said.

# More than just **kid stuff**

## Waco nonprofits provide aid, resources for autistic children

/STORY BY MEGAN DAHLE  
/PHOTO BY LARA LAZENBY

**T**oday 67 children in the United States will be diagnosed with autism: more than AIDS, juvenile diabetes and cancer combined. With so many children and families affected by the disorder, the Waco community has come together to help.

Autism is a disease that affects the brain. It is characterized by impaired social interaction and communication skills and repetitive behaviors, according to Autism Speaks, an autism advocacy organization.

Today autism affects one in 91 children, which is an increase from two years ago when the rate of autism was one in 150 children, according to Autism Speaks studies.

Sarah Skipper, a senior psychology major at Baylor, has a 14-year-old autistic brother named Gage.

"Growing up with Gage taught me the value of patience, understanding and courage," she said.

Skipper said she plans to go to graduate school in clinical psychology to focus on autism research so in the future she can help other autistic children and their families.

"I believe that the general public may not completely understand and is quick to think that all autistic children are dealing with the same

issues," Skipper said. "It is important that the public realizes that although there are general characteristics of autism, it affects each child differently."

Baylor library information specialist Laura Sumrall is a mother of three, including a 10-year-old son with autism.

"We need so much help to find a cure and to support the generation



Ashley Noble and Kendra Kerley read with Daniel Sumrall in his small group at the Baylor Autism Resource Center.

that is being diagnosed now and have been diagnosed in the past 10 years," she said. "These folks can contribute in a positive manner and do not need to be shunned."

Currently there is no definitive answer to the cause of autism or a cure, said Dr. Julie Ivey, director and founder of The Baylor Autism Resource Center.

The Baylor Autism Resource Center, located on Baylor's campus, is a place where children with autism and their parents can go to learn about the disorder. The center also provides social skill groups, resources, training workshops for educators, parents and paraprofessionals, and aid to those affected by the disorder throughout Central Texas.

"The center is a safe, controlled environment that helps autistic children practice skills," Ivey said. "Our hope is that they go out in the community and use the skills they are learning here."

Waco is also home to a large support group called the Heart of Texas Autism Network. Ivey described it as a strong support group for

**"We need so much help**

**to find a cure"**

**- Laura Sumrall**

children and families that are

living with autism. The future of autism is

unknown, but places like the Baylor Autism Resource Center and Heart of Texas Autism Network are helping the Waco community to work through the transitions of the children as well as the parents.

Sumrall said she and her son have found great support within the Waco community.

"We have been so overwhelmed and thankful for the resources we've been blessed with through the love and care he has received the past six years, from the incredible bus ladies to the outstanding teachers he's had."