

Doctor goes extra miles to help girl

BYLINE: ED QUIOCO

A neurosurgeon meets an 11-year-old with a brain aneurysm while on a medical mission and brings her here for an operation.

Claudia Iraheta has always wanted to ride a bicycle on the dusty streets of the small town where she lives with her family in El Salvador.

But the severe headaches that have plagued her since she was a year old made the childhood venture daunting. The loss of hearing and partial paralysis that accompanied her frequent headaches also made learning and writing difficult for Claudia, now 11.

"She wants to be able to ride a bike with her friends," said Claudia's mother, Estela Iraheta, who spoke through an interpreter. "She has always watched it and wanted to do it, but her head hurt too much."

Claudia now may get to ride a bike, thanks to a Tarpon Springs doctor who met Claudia in July while on a medical mission to El Salvador.

With her mother at her side, Claudia was recovering Monday at Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital from surgery to remove a large brain aneurysm that had put pressure on her brain stem.

The surgery, performed at Shands Hospital in Gainesville five days earlier, was a success. Claudia's severe headaches and partial paralysis on the right side of her face and the left side of her body should be cured, according to doctors.

Claudia was able to get the treatment she needed because of Dr. George Giannakopoulos, a neurosurgeon at Helen Ellis, who examined her during one of his medical missions to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador.

Claudia's headaches were getting worse, a sign that the aneurysm was getting bigger and was likely to burst, said Giannakopoulos. He knew Claudia would have a much better chance of surviving the congenital condition if she had surgery in the United States.

"It's the most difficult surgery that a brain surgeon can do, and only a handful in the country can perform this type of surgery," Giannakopoulos said.

He paid for Claudia and her mother to come to Florida, housed them at his home and arranged for a neurosurgeon at Shands at the University of Florida to perform the surgery.

An aneurysm is a weakening of a blood vessel, causing an enlargement that can burst. Claudia's aneurysm was about the diameter of a half dollar and was located off a branch of the basilar artery, which supplies blood to the brain stem, said Dr. Arthur Day, who performed the 10-hour surgery.

"It was a complex operation," Day said. "Whenever you have an aneurysm in that location, there is always a very high risk to it."

Day performed the surgery for free, but Giannakopoulos had to pay the \$ 10,000 hospital bill at Shands. Helen Ellis officials are allowing Claudia to recover at the hospital for free.

Giannakopoulos, who travels to San Salvador once or twice a year for about 10 days at a time, mostly helps children in need of surgery. He said it is all worthwhile.

"We know we can't save the world," he said. "Sometimes you feel so frustrated because you can only save one or two. But when you have a success story like this, it makes you feel good. You look at yourself at the end of the day and say, 'I've done something good today.' "

Claudia was one of the dozens of children Giannakopoulos examined at a hospital in San Salvador. Doctors there originally suspected Claudia had a tumor in her brain and even performed surgery to remove the tumor before discovering that she had an aneurysm.

"When I first saw her, she came in a very scared kid," Giannakopoulos said. "She was dragging her foot and her face was drooping, but she had these angel eyes."

The aneurysm made life difficult for Claudia, her mother said, and finally getting cured is a miracle from God.

"God is present in her life every hour," Estela Iraheta said. "God sent the doctor to help her."

Claudia and her family live in Cojutepeque, a town near San Salvador, where her father is a fabric worker. Claudia, an Enrique Iglesias fan, likes coloring and "she likes to go look at clothes and she likes the new fashions," her mother said.

Claudia cried Monday because she misses her friends. She hopes to buy a bicycle and take it back to El Salvador so she can finally ride with them, her mother said.

Giannakopoulos said he wants to observe Claudia for a few days before letting her return home. But before then, perhaps, Claudia can get another wish fulfilled.

"Perhaps maybe we can take her to (Walt Disney World) because that's all she says she wants to do," he said. "The only thing I want to do is to see that girl smile. You see a crack of a smile and it makes it all worthwhile."