

LI hospital treating orphaned Haitian baby

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With one sunny smile from little Patricia Pierre, the bustle of the lobby at St. Francis Hospital in Flower Hill came to a halt yesterday afternoon as people flocked to the side of her pink stroller, cooing over her big eyes and dimples.

"Now she's showing off," said the hospital's medical director, Dr. Jack Soterakis.

Smiles are hard-earned for the 19-month-old Haitian orphan. Last year, she was found abandoned in front of a hospital in Port-au-Prince and was sent to live at an orphanage for ill and terminally ill children because she had respiratory problems.

Dr. Lionel Barrau, chief of nephrology at St. Francis, was visiting his native Haiti last December and saw Patricia at the orphanage, where he was struck by her lively spirits despite her health problems.

"She was the smallest one there, and she was very vivacious," Barrau said yesterday.

Barrau examined Patricia at the orphanage with a simple stethoscope and could hear a heart murmur. He faxed an echocardiogram of her heart to his St. Francis colleague, director of pediatric cardiology Dr. Sean Levchuck, who diagnosed her with pulmonary valve stenosis.

The heart condition is an abnormality where blood flow to the lungs is impeded. Soterakis said it is difficult for very young children to live with the condition for as long as Patricia did.

"She survived somehow," he said. "God was watching over her."

Barrau arranged for Patricia to come to St. Francis for a procedure to clear her heart valve, with support from the Mercy and Sharing Foundation of Colorado. The hospital donated its services. She flew to New York last week and stayed with Barrau's sister-in-law Sharon Edwards, a retired operating room nurse living in Massapequa.

On Wednesday, Levchuck inserted a balloon catheter through Patricia's right leg and

expanded the balloon to tear open a mass of scar tissue that was blocking her heart valve. The difference was dramatic, Barrau said.

"Before she went in, she was huffing and puffing" with labored breathing, he said. "Now she's breathing like you and me."

Patricia was discharged yesterday afternoon and will stay with Edwards until Patricia's visa expires in March so that she can be near St. Francis if she needs follow-up care. Then, she must return to Haiti to become available for adoption.

That blockbuster smile has worked its charms: A nurse at St. Francis has already expressed interest in adopting her.

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