

The Palm Beach Post

REAL NEWS STARTS HERE

September 20, 2011

THIS DOCTOR HAS A BIG MISSION.



TAYLOR JONES/Staff Photographer

PEDIATRIC HEART FIXER: St. Mary's Medical Center has just hired Dr. Michael Black, a pediatric cardiac surgeon. He joins the West Palm Beach hospital's medical staff to develop its new Pediatric Congenital Heart Program.

TO MEND PALM BEACH COUNTY'S TINIEST HEARTS

St. Mary's new pediatric open-heart surgery program is a Palm Beach County medical milestone.

By STACEY SINGER
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

When Dr. Michael Black operates, the world is reduced to a tiny heart, slender surgical instruments, a camera, a screen.

"When they undrape the baby, I think, wow, look at those tiny hands, those little feet," Black said. "While you're operating, all you see is the heart, and it seems enormous through the scope."

Black is a heart surgeon who specializes in repairing birth defects. His arrival this month at the Children's Hospital at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach marks the start of the hospital's long-sought pediatric open-heart surgery program, a milestone for Palm Beach County.

In a career spanning more than 15 years at

See PEDIATRIC HEARTS, 8D ►



Photo courtesy of the Strahl Family

MEET ELIAS: Elias Strahl was born with multiple holes in his heart. His mother, Deann, researched her options and turned to Dr. Michael Black, who operated on him. Today, Elias is an active Palm Beach Gardens middle-schooler who plans to learn to dive. He takes no medications for his heart.

■ **TURN TO PAGE 8D TO SEE WHAT ELIAS LOOKS LIKE TODAY**

DID YOU KNOW?

> **35,000:** The number of children born each year in the United States with a heart defect

> **130:** Estimated number of children sent out of Palm Beach County each year for pediatric heart services

> PEDIATRIC HEART FACILITIES

IN FLORIDA: St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach, plus hospitals in Miami, Hollywood, Tampa and Orlando

Families need not travel for care

► PEDIATRIC HEARTS from 1D

hospitals in Canada as well as San Francisco and Palo Alto, Calif., Black says he has operated on thousands of tiny babies' hearts, and was among the first to use arthroscopic techniques, using a small incision through the sternum, rather than splitting the rib cage.

In December 2000, the tiny heart beneath Black's scope belonged to Elias Strahl, now an 11-year-old Palm Beach Gardens middle-schooler. As a newborn, Elias' heart had a murmur. Multiple holes between chambers caused it to inefficiently race at aerobic levels just to keep him alive. His mother, Deeann Strahl, recalled the desperate vigil to feed him when he lacked the energy to suck.

"His breath was so shallow, and he would breathe fast," she recalls.

Elias' skin was pale, his lips and fingers bluish-red from poorly oxygenated blood. By the time he was 6 months old, when most babies can sit up by themselves, Elias lacked the energy to even roll over, she said.

Her cardiologist suggested open heart surgery, which would involve opening her baby's rib cage like a kitchen cabinet. She couldn't imagine anything so painful and risky. She began researching minimally invasive cardiac surgery and that led her to Black, who was in California at Stanford University's Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at the time.

"I said, 'Look, I'm not doing anything crazy or experimental, I have been doing this for a decade,'" Black said.

They went ahead with the surgery. The heart is

divided into four chambers, upper and lower, left and right. Elias had holes in both the upper and lower chambers, one of them bigger than a centimeter. Black remembers the holes, and he remembers how Elias' color improved immediately after he delicately patched them.

"Elias was out of the hospital in three days," Deeann Strahl said. "His teething pain was worse than his recovery from the surgery."

Black recalled an early morning phone call from Deeann, a few days after the operation.

"She said, 'He just slept for seven hours; I'm afraid something is wrong,'" Black recalled with a smile. "I said, 'Welcome to normal life. Get used to it.'"

Elias now participates in jujitsu and is a second-degree black belt. This year he plans to learn to dive. He needs no medications, his heartbeat is normal.

Local need shown

Until now, Palm Beach County babies with serious heart defects were sent to Miami, Hollywood, Tampa or Orlando for heart repair. About 35,000 children a year are born with a heart defect in the United States; one West Palm Beach cardiology group told the state it sent about 130 children out of county each year for services.

Having to travel can be stressful for families, said Dr. Harry Bayron, a pediatric cardiologist with Pediatrix Medical Group of Florida's West Palm Beach Cardiology group.

"They might need to be down there for a week or two, and that creates a lot of additional pressure on the family," he said.

Bayron, who sits on the hospital commit-

tee involved in the open heart program's creation, praised Black's ability to connect with parents, to comfort them and explain the risks and benefits of his techniques. He said St. Mary's will start slowly, doing straightforward surgeries, as Black's new team learns how he works.

"The most important part is to have good results from day one, and that is very clear in our minds," he said.

Last year Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood launched a heart transplant program. The opening of St. Mary's pediatric open-heart program portends the start of a rivalry. Open-heart programs are typically supposed to handle at least 100 cases a year so that the surgeons and staff are proficient. Joe DiMaggio did about 240 cases in the past year.

Dr. Frank Scholl, chief of pediatric cardiac surgery at Joe DiMaggio, said he originally objected to the launch of a heart program at St. Mary's on the grounds that it would make it tougher for other pediatric open-heart programs to maintain quality and efficiency. He's still concerned about it.

Heart surgery is a hugely expensive endeavor, both for the hospitals and for the families and insurers who must pay for it. Charges usually run over \$100,000 per case.

The uncomplicated



TAYLOR JONES/Staff Photographer

REUNION: Elias and his mother, Deeann Strahl, of Palm Beach Gardens, talk with Dr. Michael Black. Black operated on Elias for a heart defect when Elias was just an infant. Today Elias participates in jujitsu and has a normal heartbeat.

holes that Black usually closes through the chest with a patch and sutures are more often closed at Joe DiMaggio via an umbrella-like device inserted through a catheter, Scholl said.

"The vast majority are closed now through an even more minimally invasive technique, through a catheter in the groin," Scholl said.

There are pros and cons to both techniques, Black said. His surgery can take longer and require a heart-lung machine. The catheter-placed device requires the use of a significant amount of radiation, and a man-made piece that may or may not fail during a patient's life, Black said. Both doctors have strong opinions.

The best news is that patients have options, Black said. Scholl agreed.

"There is no room in this for egos," he said, "no

room for doing this for anything but the highest and most important reasons."

Black said he's been impressed with the experience and the commitment of the administration and the staff at St. Mary's.

"Families deserve to stay in their own homes and have their support

structures available to them, especially during times of need," he said. "Palm Beach County is very large, and it's kind of unfair to expect patients to travel an hour-and-a-half, two hours, for care. If our results are as good or better, then why shouldn't they stay here?"

©stacey_singer@obpost.com