

Surgeon gives boy, 9, hope after rare stroke

By **STACEY SINGER**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Updated: 11:43 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010

Posted: 10:18 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010

By the time Dr. Neil Patel opened a hole in 9-year-old Brycen Brant's skull, the stroke had nearly won.

A tangle of malformed veins in the young athlete's brain had ruptured many hours earlier, as Brycen slept over at his cousins' house in The Acreage, and now a ball of blood surged into the boy's head, threatening his life.

Looking at the CT scan, Patel figured he had only minutes to work.

Strokes in children are rare, only about 2 per 100,000. Consequently, so, too, are surgeons trained to respond to such emergencies. There are only about 200 nationwide.

Patel was recruited to St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach this fall, arriving on Oct. 1, after a year of training alongside surgeons at top-rated Cincinnati Children's Hospital. He has agreed to be on call 24-7, and take all patients, regardless of insurance.

At the Palms West Hospital's emergency department in Loxahatchee, a CT scan showed a massive blood clot. Brycen was having a stroke. But there were no qualified surgeons on call that day, a Saturday. Brycen would have to be flown.

Patel met the helicopter at St. Mary's. When he began to operate, he saw just how tenuous the boy's situation had become.

"When we put the tube into his brain the fluid shot across the room; there was that much pressure," Patel said. "If they had flown him all the way down to Miami Children's he would have died."

Before the brain hemorrhage, Brycen Brant had been a baseball-playing, karate-practicing, sweet and funny kid who alternated between his dad's house in The Acreage and his mom's place in Palm Beach Gardens.

What kind of life would he have after such a terrible stroke? His mom, dad and stepmom sat by, worrying.

When Brycen finally emerged from surgery, head shaven, tubes fixed into his skull, the boy's right arm and leg were paralyzed. He breathed with a ventilator. He'd open his eyes from time to time. But how much of Brycen was still there? They didn't know.

Brycen's father, Jake Brant, is a Boynton Beach paramedic. Over the years, he had transported many stroke victims to hospitals, and he knew the signs of brain damage.

He stared helplessly at his son after the surgery, wondering about his future, squeezing Brycen's left hand and asking him to squeeze back. It was late the second day when Brycen finally did. That was good.

On the third day, the ventilator was removed and Brycen breathed on his own. That was great.

On the fourth, Brycen began to speak, and that was both terrible and thrilling.

Brycen spoke of unendurable pain, a knife in his skull, and he cried in anguish. Once his pain was under control, he asked for his "Bobs," little tennis ball creatures he had created at school before the stroke. He told his parents he loved them.

And he asked the harder questions.

"How did this happen?" he asked. "Why me?"

Patel, who visited Brycen every day, tried to answer.

Brycen most likely was born with something called a cerebral AVM, or arteriovenous malformation. Badly formed blood vessels allow blood from arteries and veins to mix, rather than forcing it to circulate slowly through capillaries and tissue. The mixing causes many problems, such as the formation of little sacks — aneurysms, which can grow and burst. Brycen had three of them, next to the one that had burst.

About 18 out of every 100,000 people have AVMs, and every year, 1 in 4 of them will have such a stroke.

Brycen's nearly fatal stroke likely happened early in the morning, just before Halloween.

The Friday night before, Brycen had "trunk-or-treated" in The Acreage, the rural community's answer to long driveways and spread-apart houses. People in trucks and cars back up along closed roads and serve candy. After sorting through his stash, Brycen went to sleep in his cousin's room.

In the wee hours before dawn, his aunt and uncle heard Brycen scream. A nightmare, they figured. It was not until after 10 a.m. when his Uncle Doug tried to pull Brycen up and found him moaning and limp on his right side, did they realize the nightmare was real.

The surgery on Halloween was only the beginning of Brycen's ordeal.

Imaging showed a cluster of three more aneurysms near the one that had been glued shut. They had to be removed, too.

Eleven days later, in an arduous nine-hour surgery, Patel removed the rest of the venous tangle. He found scar tissue in Brycen's brain, a hint that there had been previous, undiagnosed strokes. The scarring made it more difficult to pull out the bad veins. But the surgery was successful.

Odds were that Brycen would move his right arm and leg again, and maybe even walk, Patel told Brycen's parents. The AVM should not return. By early December, Patel's optimism proved correct.

For physical therapy, Brycen had to transfer another time, this time to Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital's rehabilitation unit, the only one in Palm Beach and Broward counties. Jake Brant's co-workers at Boynton Beach Fire Rescue gave the boy a special ambulance ride from St. Mary's and promised to drive him back when he had recovered.

For three hours a day now, therapists at Joe DiMaggio coax Brycen to kneel, raise his arm, even throw and catch balls. At times he cries in pain. Other times, they make him laugh. It's exhausting, but it's paying off. The rehabilitation is moving faster than anyone had hoped.

"On Monday I came in and he was standing," Brycen's mom, Michele Brant, said. "I said, 'Brycen, you're standing!' and he said, 'Mom, if I can stand, I can walk.'"

A few days later, he took a few steps from his wheelchair to his bed.

Brycen is motivated. It's clear from his bouts of playfulness, as well as his serious pronouncements.

Asked what advice he'd give to another boy in his situation, he said: "Keep fighting."

On Dec. 5, the Boynton Beach Fire Benevolent Association hosted a pancake breakfast and rummage sale to help the family. More than 1,000 people turned out.

So many firefighters and other friends and families have asked for regular updates that Jake Brant started a diary of his son's progress. It's at www.brycebrant.com . He has words for all parents:

"When you get the chance, hug your kids longer than you normally do," Jake Brant wrote. "Let them know how important they are in your life, and never take for granted they will always be there."

Find this article at:

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/health/surgeon-gives-boy-9-hope-after-rare-stroke-112225.html>

[Print this page](#)

[Close](#)

