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Big Picture . Local Focus

Easy on the brain: Alexian offers Bolivian free innovative surgery that uses gamma rays

By Sue Ter Maat, Daily Herald reporter
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Doctors twisted metal screws into Sergio Jimenez's skull, producing a trickle of blood that ran toward his right eyebrow before a nurse dabbed it away.

Jimenez, 26, showed no emotion, but he had a lot on his mind. He'd traveled all the way from Bolivia to Alexian Brother Medical Center in Elk Grove Village for a special radiation treatment that he hoped would save his life.

Just month ago, he was happily living in the capitol city La Paz and his wife, Alejandra, and their son, 1-year-old Julian.

He was an industrial engineer with a master's degree in business administration. He'd graduated at the top of his class and was working as a consultant.

On June 13, all that changed. Within weeks he'd lost his job, his apartment and any hope that he'd ever find a way out of his predicament. But there had been clues for months.

Dizziness, nausea, headaches and the inability to speak at times – he'd hide his symptoms from everyone. With so few jobs in Bolivia, he knew hundreds of educated people like himself were just waiting to take his place if anyone knew he was sick.

Then Jimenez collapsed at home and couldn't hide anymore. When he awoke in the hospital, Bolivian doctors told him a misshapen snarl of blood vessels that he was born with 26 years ago had begun to bleed.

"My first reaction was worry because I have a family," Jimenez said, sitting in his hospital bed as Alexian Brothers waiting for the procedure. "I was married a year ago, and I have a boy – that was my first thought.

As a consultant, he had no health insurance for the \$50,000 Gamma Knife procedure he needed to save his life. His wife also an engineer had a job with health insurance for herself and Julian. But the policy didn't cover Jimenez.

It's not uncommon in Bolivia for men not to be on their wives' health insurance policy, said Jimenez's aunt, Maria Fitzgerald, a nurse at Alexian Brothers who grew up in Bolivia and moved to the United States when she was 18.

"Men (in South America) are supposed to be the head providers," Fitzgerald said. "It's not fair, but they are supposed to get their own insurance."

Jimenez called his aunt, asking if she knew anything about the procedure because she was in the medical field.

When Fitzgerald asked Alexian officials about it, she was greeted with some unexpected good news: Alexian Brothers would pay for the entire procedure.

"For the Alexian Brothers, this was a charity case on every level," said Matt Wakely, director of public relations at Alexian Brothers.

That's how Jimenez wound up thousands of miles away from home with his head bolted to a metal frame.

Developed in Sweden, the Gamma Knife is not a knife at all. Rather, the "blades" are 201 beams of cobalt radiation, or gamma rays, focused on the tiniest of brain tumors or malformations.

Without the Gamma Knife, brain masses must be surgically removed, which requires the opening of the skull.

Last week, Jimenez was escorted behind 2-foot-thick concrete walls to the Gamma Knife machine, which resembles an oversized oven.

Doctors screwed his headgear into a corresponding metal frame to keep him perfectly still during the treatment. Any movement would result in the focused beams missing their mark and killing healthy brain tissue.

Individually, the beams are harmless to the brain, but at the point where they converge, they destroy the tissue.

The doctor had previously calculated the exact coordinates that would wrap the radiation around the tangled mass, turning it into scar tissue that won't bleed anymore.

In the end, Jimenez spent 67 minutes in the chamber, listening to a collection of CDs that he provided to be piped in during the painless procedure.

The radiation treatment successfully completed, he's now staying with his aunt in Schaumburg for two months, going in for followup tests.

Jimenez's prognosis is excellent because the abnormal mass in his brain has been neutralized, said Constantin Slavin, associate professor of neurosurgery at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who had been tending Jimenez.

When he returns to Bolivia, he faces an uncertain future. Even though he's among the educated elite, he's probably unemployable, Fitzgerald said.

He's expected to make a full recovery, but he's likely to be socially stigmatized because he's been sick, she said.

Perhaps he'll move to another part of his country where no one knows him or he'll move to another country all together.

"I just want a normal life," Jimenez said. "To be able to take care of my family, have a job, so I can give my family a good life so my son can have more opportunities than what I've had."