

A team of clinicians at Schneider Regional Medical Center, led by Dr. Eric J. Stelnicki, has performed the first ever cleft palate repair in the Virgin Islands, the hospital announced Friday.

The patient, a 3 year old girl affectionately known as “Angel” is doing well and expected to be released soon.

According to the SRMC’s news release, Angel was born with a cleft of the soft palate and partial cleft of the hard palate. This condition, in which the roof of the mouth contains an opening into the nose, caused her to have problems with eating, breathing, hearing and speech development. Her parents said she was also plagued by frequent colds.

Angel’s family went a long way to try to find treatment for their daughter before learning that the answer was available at home.

“About a year ago we had a consultation with a hospital in Miami to repair Angel’s cleft palate and were not at all happy with how we were treated. Everything was very rushed and we didn’t feel like they really cared about our daughter,” Angel’s mother said.

The family had made plans to travel to Houston to consult with another surgeon, when they learned that the Schneider Regional Medical Center in St. Thomas could accommodate the surgery and that there was now a surgeon in St. Thomas, Dr. Stelnicki, who could perform the surgery. They were overjoyed.



“Being able to have this procedure done at home was a blessing! The doctors here made us feel comfortable. They fully explained exactly what they were going to do and kept us informed throughout the procedure. Even Angel was able to understand what was going to happen and was at ease because of how the staff dealt with her. On a scale of 1 to 10, they were an 11!” she said.

Angel’s parents said being at home with family around was a great comfort. It was also much less costly to be able to stay at home rather than having to deal with airfare, accommodations, transportation and weeks of missed work.

“We are so grateful for the care given to our daughter by Dr. Stelnicki, Dr. Smolarz and the entire team at the hospital. By the weekend our baby will be home with us!”

This birth defect in which the roof of the baby’s mouth, or palate, does not develop normally during pregnancy, leaving an opening or cleft that may go through to the nasal cavity. Babies with cleft palates are especially at risk of developing middle ear fluid and hearing loss. Depending on how far the cleft extends, tooth development can be affected. Speech difficulties are common because the palate is used in forming sounds. Those affected by clefts may face social, emotional and behavioral problems due to differences in appearance and the stress of intensive medical care.

Because the surgery to repair had not previously been available in the Virgin Islands, any child needing this procedure had to leave the territory.

“I am so pleased to have worked with Dr. Smolarz to correct Angel’s cleft palate. Her eating, breathing and speech will greatly improve as a result of this surgery. Our goal is to be able to provide this and other services to the people of the Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean while allowing them to stay close to home,” Stelnicki said.

This surgery is the first of a new plastic surgery program SRMC intends to build to provide life changing surgeries to both children and adults in the Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean, the hospital said. There are plans to provide the full gamut of reconstructive surgery for issues such as soft tissue repair, burns, breast reduction, breast reconstruction, hand and facial trauma and revision work.

“Plastic surgery not only corrects defects that can cause medical problems, but can be used to improve a person’s confidence, self-esteem and overall quality of life,” Chief Medical Officer Dr. Luis Amaro said. “We look forward to providing these services to the people of the Virgin Islands.”

