

# Teamwork makes a miracle

Vibrant three-year-old a testimony to the caring professionals at Royal Columbian Hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

**H**unter Kuntz is a vibrant three-year-old boy with bright brown eyes and a shy smile. Like all little boys he has bundles of energy and loves anything that moves, be it a tractor, boat or motorbike. Three years ago, Hunter was struggling for his newborn life at Royal Columbian Hospital (RCH). Born 24 weeks premature, his tiny lungs were fighting to expand. In stepped the RCH Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

team and Hunter's life miraculously transformed. Hunter was a spontaneous premature delivery. His mother, Amber Leepart from Prince George, was experiencing a regular pregnancy when she had a spontaneous premature membrane rupture. She was airlifted by B.C. Air Ambulance to Royal Columbian Hospital where she was stabilized. Forty-eight hours later, Hunter was born, and so began the long journey that was to be the first few weeks of his precious little life.

### Unanticipated events

Beth Preston, Social Worker at RCH, assisted Amber with many unforeseen practical challenges, such as arranging a place for her to stay and accessing funds for daily living expenses. Preston plays an important liaison role between the medical specialists and parents. "It is an unplanned situation. The baby has come early due to unanticipated events. The whole family is thrown into disarray. Under these circumstances the medical information can be overwhelming and I often lend emotional support by explaining and re-explaining the situation or issues once the medical staff have left the room," says Preston.

Hunter's lungs were expanding poorly and he was put on an oscillator, which increased his breaths from 60 to 600 breaths a

minute to try and force his lungs to respond. When his response was negligible, he was put on steroid medication. Joanne Woods was the physiotherapist in attendance. She administered chest therapy to make sure that any secretion in the lungs came out, to ease breathing and to prevent atelectasis (collapsed lung). At 24 weeks, a baby like Hunter cannot coordinate to suck, swallow and breathe at the same time, so the baby has to be tube-fed. A dietician makes recommendations as to what micro and macro nutrients need to be added to the milk while monitoring growth.

"We try to minimize the impact of the environment outside the womb," explains Occupational Therapist Kim Belle. From 24 to 40 weeks, the fetal brain grows about four times in volume. In that time it develops in a dark, quiet, fluid and protected environment. The fetus is a little passenger during Mum's activities. There is less gravity in the womb. Out of the womb and in an incubator the baby has to fight gravity which can be tough on the skeletal frame.

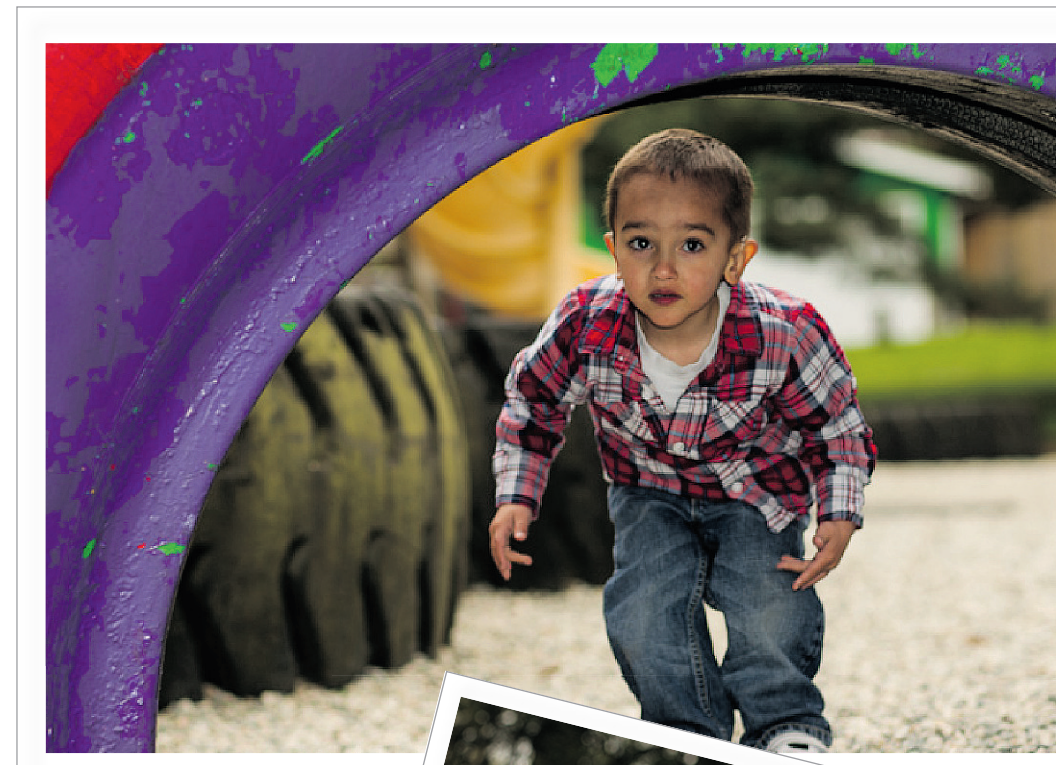
Adds Belle: "We try to recreate that safe environment. We teach the parents to recognise the baby's cues. Hearing the parents' voices, having a finger to hold, providing skin-to-skin contact, holding them in a fetal position and most importantly, recognizing deep sleep which is important for growth, are all ways in which the parents can actively care for their premature baby."

Hunter suffered a significant brain hemorrhage. Fearing the worst, Amber called her family from Prince George. In response, Hunter's dad Kenneth, grandparents, great-grandparents and aunt flew down to Vancouver for a baptism. But Hunter, feisty as ever, and with the support of the highly specialized team of medical experts, unexpectedly triumphed.

### Hunter 'living proof'

"This little boy was very tiny and he had required prolonged, intensive ventilatory care at RCH. We also diagnosed him with quite a significant stage three out of five of intra-ventricular hemorrhage (brain bleed). With careful clinical support and monitoring, that problem resolved and there is no neurological residual from his condition," says Dr. Zenon Cieslak, Paediatrician-neonatologist RCH. "Today, Hunter is a great little boy and a joy to his family. A living proof of how effective modern neonatal care can be in situations where 30 to 40 years ago, that chance would not exist."

RCH has a NICU program with one of the best survival outcomes in Canada and a very low rate of complications for extremely premature babies. RCH is the only hospital in the province that provides highly specialized cardiac, pulmonary, neurosurgery, oncology, and trauma services for pregnant women. "That unique combination has already benefited



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dozens of very sick and injured pregnant women in this province, a service and support they would not be able to receive anywhere else," says Dr. Cieslak. Queenie Lai Health Services Manager Fraser Health affirms: "Royal Columbian's NICU is a special place! The medical team becomes part of the family and the family becomes part of

the medical team. The parents are extremely aware of their babies." Composed and pragmatic, taking one day at a time, Amber speaks of her experience at RCH's NICU. "They (the staff) gave me hope. I was not crying alone. I felt supported on every level."

### Facts about Royal Columbian Hospital

**Royal Columbian Hospital (RCH) is home to the province's second largest Level III Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It provides highly specialized care for newborns who are:**

- extremely premature, born as early as 23 weeks into pregnancy and weighing less than 500 grams (the equivalent weight of a loaf of bread)
- critically ill
- requiring surgical intervention
- RCH's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) has excellent survival rates for neonates (babies who are born before their due date). This type of success is only achieved by a well integrated, highly functioning care team.
- RCH's NICU cares for more than 800 babies each year.

- Many babies cared for in the NICU are premature, while others have birth defects, infections, complications from substance misuse in pregnancy, or have experienced complications at birth.

- The duration of a newborn's stay in the NICU can range from four hours to three months, depending on the individual circumstance for each baby.

- The NICU's highly trained medical staff focuses on providing individualized care, taking into consideration the baby's physical, emotional, social, educational and spiritual needs, as well as providing emotional and practical support for parents in a safe and comfortable environment.

Royal Columbian Hospital is the only hospital in B.C. that has a trauma, neurosciences, cardiac, high-risk maternity and neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) all on one site. This means that RCH is the only hospital in the province that can care for a mother and her unborn child if:

- they are involved in a motor vehicle collision;
- the mother has a serious heart or neurological condition that requires immediate treatment.

**Centre of Excellence**  
Royal Columbian Hospital is a Fraser Health provincial centre and regional referral hospital providing specialized care for trauma, cardiac services, neurosciences, high risk maternity and neonatal intensive care for 1.6 million seriously ill and injured people from across the province. RCH is also a UBC teaching hospital with a Clinical Academic Campus.

**Raising Funds**  
Royal Columbian Hospital Foundation (RCHF) is a provincial and regional independent charitable foundation that raises millions of dollars annually to help fund priority equipment needs, facility enhancements, research, education and innovation at RCH. For more information about Royal Columbian Hospital Foundation, visit [www.rchfoundation.com](http://www.rchfoundation.com) or contact us on 604 520 4438.

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**If only he could talk.**

He would tell you there is reason to hope. He would describe the many miracles he's seen. He would go on and on about the professionals and staff - how much they care and their extraordinary life-saving skills.

We are grateful for the past 150 years of medical excellence from the Royal Columbian Hospital. This is where, in every ward, the smallest and the sickest get better.

We support the health and welfare of our communities and proudly give to the Royal Columbian Hospital.

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