



# Strong Medicine

It might be a tough job, but for Altadena pediatric surgeon Dr. James Stein, healing children is all in a day's work.

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▶ **"IT'S TOTALLY AWESOME**—THE KIND OF SMALL COMMUNITY FEEL THAT YOU GET IN ALTADENA," DR. JAMES STEIN SAID WHILE SITTING IN HIS BACKYARD. THE VIEW RESEMBLES A PAINTED POSTCARD WITH TOWERING MOUNTAINS, PALM TREES AND BLUE SKIES. THE MORNING SUN SWEEPS ACROSS THE SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS, CREATING LONG SHADOWS IN THE CREVICES. SOARING PALMS RISE ABOVE THE LUSH TREES LINING THE STREETS BENEATH THE FOOTHILLS.

Not that palm trees or blue skies coaxed Stein, born and raised on the East Coast, to California; work brought him there in 1996. Since then, he has served as attending pediatric surgeon at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, where—in addition to his many duties—he was lead surgeon during two conjoined twin separation surgeries.

Stein and his wife, Teri, just married last June. While he has lived in Altadena for five years, she recently moved here from Huntington Beach. "Everybody from Orange County has to get a passport to come up here," Stein said, laughing.

Teri agreed. "I didn't know Pasadena, Altadena—this whole end of L.A. I love going on

runs around here because there's so much ... like these old trees, the huge pines ... And the style of the homes—they have character... you've got Spanish villas, English tutors, bungalows, Craftsman ..."

The couple enjoy Altadena's local trails—Mount Lowe and Eaton Canyon—and other activities. "Teri and I use the area for hiking. I do a lot of mountain biking. We have the Aquatic Center at the Rose Bowl, where we swim." Until this year, the doctor coached his kids (from his previous marriage)—Stephanie, 17, and Dylan, 14—in the local A.Y.S.O. soccer league. But they're now both out of town at boarding school.

Stein and his wife also appreciate the variety of restaurants and the diverse cultures. They enjoy going to Old Town and cultural events at Descanso and Huntington Gardens.

Besides Stein's full-time work at Childrens Hospital, he's on call many nights to perform emergency pediatric surgeries at other hospitals: Huntington, Pomona Valley and Queen of the Valley in West Covina.

Considering he travels in many directions, Stein said Altadena is "perfectly located."

Even with his hectic schedule, Stein looks more like a relaxed surfer—in a sage-green, short-sleeved shirt, light cotton pants and sandals—than a busy surgeon.

"He has this laidback attitude," Teri confirmed. "If the kids say, 'Dad I've got this weird growth on my eye,' he always just says, 'Give it three days ... It's not a big deal.'"

Stein said part of that attitude comes from the year he spent working at a hospital in Australia. "If a physician turned to them (Australians) and said, 'I don't know what it is. It's nothing bad. Let's just watch it,' that was accepted. That's not as accepted here."

His cool confidence could only have been an advantage in his role as lead surgeon to separate two sets of conjoined twins. That he was involved in two other conjoined twin separations while training in New York, was another benefit.

The two procedures Stein led were very similar—the female conjoined twins faced each other. Each operation lasted from 22 to 24 hours and both required 80-person medical teams.

In the September 2003 surgery, 9-month-old identical conjoined twin girls lay face-to-face

joined from just below their diaphragms to their pelvises. Stein and his medical team performed a liver separation and reconstruction on the girls' urinary and reproductive tracts, as well as their vascular and musculo-skeletal systems. The large intestine could not be divided and went to one twin.

Those twins were each born with one normally developed leg but shared a conjoined leg. This leg was used to replace tissue and bone during reconstruction, leaving the girls each with one leg. The identical twins were born with a fraternal triplet sister who developed normally. (It is believed that this was only the

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second known case of conjoined twins who also were part of a set of triplets.)

In the June 2006 surgery, 10-month-old girls were joined from the lower chest to the pelvis. The surgeons performed a similar separation and reconstruction of their organs, vascular and musculo-skeletal systems. But these twins each had a pair of legs.

Stein explained why the twins' ages were right for the procedures. "Their size is good. Their bones are still more pliable. And ... the sense of identity as an individual hasn't really set in until about 1 year of age. And so there won't be, as I love to call it, 'separation anxiety' after they're split."

Regarding concerns prior to the surgeries, Stein said, "You really need to know and let the families know the risks, the benefits and the alternatives before making a decision." He gives lectures to prominent surgeons on just this subject: "The yin and yang of separating conjoined twins—balancing the financials, the ethical and the technical aspects of separation."

These days, Stein said, "I'm doing primarily clinical research in oncology. Particularly, liver tumors in kids and a tumor called neuroblastoma." And he added, "The neonatal stuff, where

we get to ... basically, reconstruct where they weren't formed the right way—it's an incredible satisfaction."

When asked whether being a father helps him relate to his patients' parents better, Stein shook his head. "I take care of a lot of kids with cancer, and I can't even fathom what it would be like to be a parent with a child with cancer ... there's just no way."

He added: "The nice part about kids is that they do tend to get better. They're very resilient."

So how are the sets of twins doing?

He saw the younger girls from the 2006 surgery this summer. "They were born with

curvature of the spine, and they may still need additional operations for the hips ... they're growing, doing well."

"The other twins moved to Iowa," Stein said, referring to the girls from the 2003 surgery; they're now almost 5 years old. About a year ago, ABC's program "20/20" did a story on them, as well as the twins from the 2006 surgery, so he was able to see their progress.

"Their mom and dad are from the Midwest. They're on a big farm. And they're running around. They use little walkers with wheels and they just cruise," Stein said, smiling. "They even ride horses."

He credits the twins' parents for being "so keyed into making sure their physical therapy is all getting done ... It takes a lot of work."

The doctor has a framed photo; in it, three little girls with round, rosy cheeks and blonde ponytails stand near their mother. There's a huge expanse of farmland in the distance. It's hard to tell which two were once conjoined twins—all of the little girls' smiles are equally as huge.

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