



EVE EDELHEIT | Times

Sebastián Vixtha was supposed to be ‘completely normal’ after surgery.

The doctors who diagnosed Sebastián Vixtha's heart defect told his mother it was serious. But they were hopeful about his long-term prognosis, as long as he underwent three surgeries. "He's going to be normal, completely normal," Sandra Vázquez recalled them saying. At 2 weeks old, Sebastián survived a risky heart surgery at All Children's and returned home. But one month later, he started vomiting and had to return to the hospital. While he was there, his heart stopped. The doctors said his aorta had narrowed. They tried to open it up two different ways. Sebastián seemed to be getting better, so the doctors scheduled another surgery in May. "They clearly told us that this surgery would be less risky than the first," his mother said in Spanish. But after that procedure, Sebastián suffered a second heart attack. He died on June 1, 2017.



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Leslie Lugo picked up a serious infection in the hospital.

Leslie Lugo was born Jan. 2, 2017, with Down syndrome and a number of serious heart defects often associated with it. Her first procedure on Jan. 12 went well, records show. But after a second surgery that March, she developed an infection deep in her surgical wound. Peer-reviewed research shows such infections occur in fewer than 5 percent of heart surgery cases. The doctors and nurses spent eight weeks treating Leslie's infection with antibiotics and a wound vacuum system. She needed another surgery after that and came out too weak to breathe or pump blood to her body on her own. She died a few days later on May 30.

Leslie's mother, Ma Candelaria Tellez, said her doctors had told her All Children's was the best hospital. In the end, she felt deceived. "I don't recommend this hospital to anyone," she said in Spanish. Leslie is buried at a cemetery beside the interstate near the family's home in Dover. On a windy afternoon this September, her family visited the grave with two bunches of roses, one red, the other pale peach. Her mother washed her headstone, removing the browned leaves and branches that had blown onto the plot. Her father strung up a balloon with the characters from the movie *Frozen*. The family of five huddled together, the mother's gaze fixed off in the distance. They stayed until it started to rain.



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Madeline Rebori traveled 900 miles to be saved.

Not long after Madeline Hope Rebori was born in 2015, a cardiologist at the All Children's Hospital Heart Institute said nothing could save her, her parents recalled. Her family got a second opinion from a Stanford doctor, then took her to Cincinnati Children's Hospital, where surgeons performed a life-saving surgery. Madeline is now 3 years old. She takes tap and ballet. She performed *I'm a Little Teapot* at a recent recital. Madeline still needs one more surgery for her heart to be fully repaired. Her parents, Brian and Stephanie Rebori, are optimistic. They intend to take her back to Cincinnati.

 En español
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» CHILDREN continued from 1A

Times reporters spent a year examining the All Children's Heart Institute — a small, but important division of the larger hospital devoted to caring for children born with heart defects. They compared Florida's 10 pediatric heart surgery programs by analyzing a state database of 27 million hospital admissions spanning a decade. Then they reviewed thousands of pages of medical reports, interviewed current and former hospital workers, spoke with top health care safety experts and tracked down families across Central Florida coping with catastrophic outcomes.

They discovered a program beset with problems that were whispered about in heart surgery circles but hidden from the public. Among the findings: ● All Children's surgeons made serious mistakes, and their procedures went wrong in unusual ways. They lost needles in at least two infants' chests. Sutures burst. Infections mounted. Patches designed to cover holes in tiny hearts failed. ● Johns Hopkins' handpicked administrators disregarded safety concerns the program's staff had raised as early as 2015. It wasn't until early 2017 that All Children's stopped performing the most complex procedures. And it wasn't until late that year that it pulled one of its main surgeries in October and is conducting a review of the program.

"Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital is defined by our commitment to patient safety and providing the highest quality care possible to the children and families we serve," the hospital wrote. "An important part of that commitment is a willingness to learn." All Children's isn't the first hospital to struggle with pediatric heart surgeries. Several heart programs, including one at St. Mary's Medical Center in West

‘Maybe they should have hit the pause button.’

As a newborn in 2013, Alexcia Escamilla survived one of the most difficult procedures in pediatric heart surgery. But after another surgery in 2016 — a procedure that was supposed to be much less risky — Alexcia suffered a stroke that left her unable to walk or speak. Her mother, Rosana Escamilla, never allowed herself to believe the doctors were at fault. A woman of faith, she held a conviction that God had his reasons. Alexcia's father, Oscar, quietly harbored doubts. Two years later, when Rosana learned other children's surgeries had gone badly, she spread out her daughter's medical records and began closely studying each detail. "If there was such turmoil they should have stopped and said, 'We are going through some changes,'" she said. "Maybe they should have hit the pause button."

ida pediatric heart program had seen in the last decade. ● Parents were kept in the dark about the institute's troubles, including some that affected their children's care. Leslie Lugo's family didn't know she caught pneumonia in the hospital until they read her autopsy report. The parents of another child didn't learn a surgical needle was left inside their baby until after she was sent home.

The *Times* presented its findings to hospital leaders in a series of memos in early November. They declined interview requests and did not make the institute's doctors available to comment. In a statement, All Children's did not dispute the *Times*' reporting. The hospital said it halted all pediatric heart surgeries in October and is conducting a review of the program.

"Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital is defined by our commitment to patient safety and providing the highest quality care possible to the children and families we serve," the hospital wrote. "An important part of that commitment is a willingness to learn." All Children's isn't the first hospital to struggle with pediatric heart surgeries. Several heart programs, including one at St. Mary's Medical Center in West

Palm Beach, have shut down after reports of high mortality rates. Most pediatric heart surgeries involve stopping a child's heart and operating in a space no larger than a walnut shell. But advances in science and technology have made them strikingly safe. In Florida, the survival rate for children who have surgery to correct a heart defect is now 97 percent, the *Times* found. All Children's had earned a reputation as a community treasure that parents could trust to guide them through the terrifying experience of having a seriously ill child. Under Johns Hopkins, everyone assumed it would only get better.

"You hear Johns Hopkins, there's a sense of prestige," said Rosana Escamilla, whose daughter Alexcia suffered a stroke after heart surgery in 2016. "You think your child is in the best hands." Instead, operations that surgeons described as low risk began failing. "Somebody has to do something," Sandra Vázquez remembers one of the other mothers telling her in a quiet corner of the unit, "because they are killing our children." In interviews in April and May, All Children's CEO Dr. Jonathan Ellen told the *Times* that the Heart



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Ca'terriunna McGowan needed a new heart.

Twelve days after she was born, Ca'terriunna McGowan went to Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital in hopes of getting a new heart. She was designated high priority on the transplant waiting list. Ca'terriunna had been sedated for most of her life. As she waited for her new heart, she grew sicker. In January 2018, her blood tested positive for a bacterial infection. In March, her heart rate was erratic. Her new heart came in early May. The transplant was a success, records show, but complications continued. Her kidneys and liver started to fail. "She was going downhill," recalled her father, Glen McGowan, as he stood outside his house and clutched photos of Ca'terriunna before and after her operation. At the end of May, Ca'terriunna was placed on heart and lung support. She died in June.

Institute had its "challenges" under control. It had slowed surgeries to the lowest level possible without shutting down. "We've already self-policed our way out," Ellen said, noting that the hospital had been performing only low-complexity heart operations for much of 2017. It was a tacit acknowledgment that All Children's hadn't been able to perform the hardest heart procedures. But the hospital couldn't handle the less complicated cases either, records and interviews show.

Bigger ambitions

All Children's Hospital opened in St. Petersburg in 1926 as the American Legion Hospital for Crippled Children. Over the decades, it had grown into a profitable children's hospital, locally run and independent. But members of its board had bigger ambitions. They wanted a partner to raise the hospital's profile. In 2011, they effectively gave the hospital to the Baltimore-based Johns Hopkins, which was in the

midst of expanding into a \$6 billion global health system. All Children's would be its sixth hospital. Johns Hopkins is considered the birthplace of modern American medicine. At the time, its flagship hospital had held the top spot on *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings for 21 straight years. By the end of 2012, two longtime Hopkins faculty members were appointed to key roles in St. Petersburg. Ellen, the director of pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore,

replaced the hospital's CEO. And Dr. Paul Colombani, the director of pediatric surgery at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center, became chief of pediatric surgery. The new leaders took special interest in the All Children's heart surgery program, already one of the best in the state, but not among the ranks of the country's elite. The goal was to build a "top-flight, excellent program that could provide unique care for children," Ellen told the *Times* in April. The hospital's heart surgeons were already performing about 200 procedures annually.

Dr. James Quintessenza, the chief of pediatric heart surgery, took the most cases, including many of the hardest ones. He had consistently good results. Dr. Jeffrey Jacobs performed surgeries, too, but was a leader outside the operating room. He edited academic journals, spoke at conferences around the world and sat on committees devoted to improving safety. A third surgeon, Dr. Paul Chai, operated at All Children's only occasionally. In 2013, Chai left for a job in New York. The hospital's new leaders replaced him with Dr. Tom Karl, then 65, who had spent the previous six years practicing at a children's hospital in Australia. Karl had worked at some of the nation's best pediatric heart surgery programs and published more than 100 peer-reviewed papers. But in 2008, the University of California San Francisco had suspended his clinical privileges amid allegations he "disrupted patient care and educational activities," he later told the Florida Board of Medicine. He said internal politics were to blame.

After Karl arrived in St. Petersburg, the hospital's administration made a consequential change. For years, All Children's cardiologists sent their most complicated cases to Quintessenza for surgery. Now all cases were to be distributed equally among Quintessenza, Karl and Jacobs. » See **CHILDREN, 14A**

The doctors



Dr. Jonathan Ellen
A longtime Johns Hopkins administrator, Dr. Jonathan Ellen came to All Children's in 2011 as physician-in-chief, and was later promoted to CEO. He set out to turn the Heart Institute into one of the nation's top programs.



Dr. Paul Colombani
Dr. Paul Colombani is the chief of surgery at All Children's. He came to the hospital after 20 years as the chief of pediatric surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Multiple employees expressed concerns about surgeries to him as early as 2015.



Dr. Jeffrey Jacobs
An editor of multiple medical journals and frequent speaker at conferences, Dr. Jeffrey Jacobs is known for his academic work. Employees started expressing concerns about his surgeries in 2015.



Dr. Tom Karl
All Children's hired veteran heart surgeon Dr. Tom Karl in 2014 from a children's hospital in Australia. Employees started expressing concerns about his surgeries in 2015.



Dr. James Quintessenza
Dr. James Quintessenza was an All Children's pediatric heart surgeon for almost 30 years. After disagreements with Colombani, he was demoted and pushed out in 2016.

Dr. Nhue Lap Do

Dr. Nhue Lap Do joined the All Children's Heart Institute surgical team in mid 2017, straight out of fellowships at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Photos from Times archives, the Baltimore Sun (2011), All Children's press release, the San Francisco Chronicle (2002) and UK HealthCare.