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## THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

### Campaign targets premature births

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For the past 30 years, researchers at four Utah hospitals have looked for ways to ensure fewer babies are born before they reach full term. But statistics show the number of babies born before reaching 37 weeks in the womb has only gone up, nationally and in Utah. Physician Michael Varner, the principal investigator in five clinical trials under way in Utah to reduce preterm births, remains optimistic.

"At some point in the future, we'll be able to predict with some precision who will and who will not deliver prematurely, as well as individualize treatment," Varner said.

November marks the third annual Prematurity Awareness Month sponsored by the March of Dimes, which had previously focused on preventing birth defects and infant mortality. In 2003, it launched a campaign to address the increasing rate of premature birth.

Between 1992 and 2002, the number of premature births nationally increased 1.4 percent, affecting 480,812 births in 2002, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Utah saw an increase of about 3 percent over the same decade, with 4,662 babies born preterm in 2002.

The consequences are significant. Babies born early often have difficulty breathing and problems with their heart, brain, digestion and eyes. Though most survive, some end up with lasting disabilities such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation and learning problems, chronic lung disease, and vision and hearing problems.

Possibilities Varner cites for the increased prematurity rates include more twin and triplet births because of the increased use of assisted reproductive technology, and a trend toward having children at a later age. Older women are also more likely to have fraternal twins than younger women.

Doctors are also more likely to deliver premature babies than in years past because of better care in newborn intensive care units, Varner

said. For now, there is no way to tell who will deliver prematurely, though there are known risk factors, Varner said. Those who have had a previous preterm birth, a family history of preterm births, or are pregnant with multiple fetuses are more likely to carry a baby for less than a complete term.

Varner's current research includes testing prevention measures such as supplementing women's diets with omega-3 fatty acid.

Doctors still aren't sure why Nancy and Dallas Brown's first child arrived on Sept. 21, three months early. After a month's time divided between LDS and University hospitals, Tyler ingests his mother's milk through a tube and breathes with the help of a ventilator. Nurses respond quickly to beeps from a machine monitoring his vital signs.

Tyler weighs more than 2 pounds, and his parents are impressed with his growth, but concerned about the future.

"He looks pretty healthy, but he really is a sick little guy," Nancy Brown said.

Last week, Tyler's right lung collapsed. The day before, he had a seizure, probably due to two serious episodes of bleeding in his brain. After so many calls, Dallas Brown said every time the phone rings at their West Valley City home, he wonders if it's the hospital.

"Your heart drops into your stomach and you hope it's not them saying he's not going to make it," he said. His wife adds: "It's kind of an unknown every day."

To treat the resulting complications, doctors draw spinal fluid daily from a reservoir in Tyler's fist-sized skull. Besides not being able to circulate spinal fluid, Tyler could have cerebral palsy, doctors say. The Browns are certain their son will survive, but have realized he'll probably have physical handicaps.

"We hope that he's normal," Nancy said. "But right now this is what makes Tyler, Tyler."

If all at the hospital goes well, Tyler could be headed home on Christmas Eve. The Browns say medical costs will likely surpass \$1 million, but that doesn't matter as much as being able to hold him without endangering his health, at home.

"You just remember he's your kid," Nancy Brown said. "Whether or not he has problems."

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## Utah clinical trials related to premature births

Women who have previously delivered prematurely and are less than four months pregnant can aid in research by participating in clinical trials at one of the following locations: LDS Hospital, 408-3577; University Hospital, 585-5499; Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, 357-7923; McKay-Dee Hospital, 387-4641

The trials include:

- \* Using omega-3 fatty acid supplementation to reduce the risk of recurrent spontaneous preterm birth.
- \* Injecting progesterone to reduce the rate of spontaneous preterm birth in twins and triplets.
- \* Using vitamin E and C for prevention of pre-eclampsia (or toxemia), pregnancy complications for which the only cure is delivery.
- \* Treatment regimens for gestational diabetes.
- \* Administering magnesium sulfate during labor to mothers for prevention of cerebral palsy in newborns.

## Warning signs of premature birth

See your doctor if you have increased:

- \* Cramping
- \* Backaches
- \* Vaginal pressure and discharge
- \* Are bleeding or leaking fluid

Source: Salt Lake City physician Michael Varner

\* For more information visit <http://www.marchofdimes.com> or contact Parent to Parent, a local support group, by calling Becky Hatfield, 801-581-2098

## How to help

\* The March of Dimes will place business and community leaders "under arrest" at a temporary jail space at Chili's near Trolley Square in Salt Lake City on Tuesday. Bail money will go to the March of Dimes.

\* Volunteers are needed by The March of Dimes to help on the day of the event. Call 801-746-5540.

A nurse adjusts **Tyler Brown**'s blankets at Primary Children's Medical Center on Tuesday. Tyler was born 14 weeks early. Stephen Holt/The Salt Lake Tribune Jump Page A9: Graphic: Preterm births (line graph) The Salt Lake Tribune

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