

TINY BUT MIGHTY



Baby of the family Lashwyn with (from left) his brother Leshawn, 11; father Nishan Pillai; mother Tunitha Reku; and sisters Dashnelle, nine, and Lashell, 11. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



Lashwyn Nishan Pillai was born in 2018 at 24 weeks old and weighed only 677g (left). He spent about five months in the neonatal intensive care unit at the National University Hospital (NUH). PHOTO: NISHAN PILLAI

Whole family took flu jabs to protect little baby

Well before the pandemic hit, the Pillai family were already experts in hygiene and social distancing.

They did not have a choice. Their youngest child, Lashwyn Nishan, was born at 24 weeks old in January 2018 at 677g after an emergency C-section that also threatened the life of his mother, Ms Tunitha Reku.

Ms Reku, 40, an assistant teacher at a special-needs school, recalls that the nurses told her Lashwyn appeared lifeless after delivery, while she lost consciousness after massive internal bleeding. "But when they brought me back, he started crying," she says.

Keeping his fragile immune system safe was a priority when his parents took him home after about five months in the neonatal intensive care unit at the National University Hospital (NUH).

Besides stocking up on hand sani-

tisers and barring extended family from visiting, Mr Nishan Pillai, 41, a finance and operations manager, and Ms Reku both went for flu jabs and checks for chickenpox.

So did their three other kids, now aged nine to 11, and both sets of grandparents. Their helper was not allowed to handle the baby in the beginning too.

Lashwyn's first year at home was a whirlwind of medical follow-ups, surgery for hernia and a constant battle against common viral infections. Because of his lung issues, a common cold would escalate quickly into a cough, followed by breathless episodes that sometimes required emergency visits to the hospital.

Instead of the customary first-month celebration, extended relatives met the toddler only last year when he was about one year old.

As Lashwyn's health improved, the Pillais enrolled him in a childcare centre nearby in March, only to pull him out quickly because of the circuit breaker.

He gradually resumed lessons in June and "loves school", his mother says of her chatty little one, who made friends with this reporter and the photographer during the interview.

"He's got a special place in everyone's heart. He's the smallest at the childcare centre. Even the K1 and K2 children want to play with him."

Just as things were looking up, Lashwyn had a seizure last month during a viral fever. Thankfully, he was with a doctor at the accident and emergency department when it happened, and was admitted for two nights.

"That's when all the emotions came back – the worries, why he had to go through this again," says Mr Pillai.

That episode had a silver lining, however, when Ms Reku discovered that her son could use a fork and feed himself independently.

"I didn't know whether to be upset that he's in the hospital or be super proud that he's eating the noodles by himself," she says.

The Pillais are grateful that Lashwyn has rallied the entire family together. His elder sister Lashell, 11, who dotes on him, loves "how much grit he has and how cute he is".

Having him has also reframed the parenting parameters for Ms Reku and her husband.

"As long as he's better than the day before, it's an achievement to me," she says.

Family support is crucial

Pandemic lockdowns in countries such as Denmark and Ireland reportedly led to fewer preterm births earlier this year. Experts there speculate that reduced stress could be a cause.

However, KK Women's And Children's Hospital (KKH) and the National University Hospital (NUH) do not see a similar trend here for premature babies, who are those born before 37 weeks.

The proportion of preemies here has held steady over the last five years at between one in 12 babies and one in 11 babies, according to a Ministry of Health spokesman.

Worldwide, the figure is one in 10 babies.

Dr Quek Bin Huey, head and senior consultant in the neonatal intensive care unit of the KKH's Department of Neonatology, says that while circuit breaker measures may have resulted in less commuting and less stress, there were reports of expectant mothers facing increased stress because of the challenges of working from home and the loss or drop in financial support because of the economic impact of Covid-19.

Dr Khoo Poh Choo, deputy head and senior consultant at KKH's Department of Neonatology, says premature birth is the leading cause of death in children under the age of five worldwide.

"Babies born too early may have more health issues than babies born full term, and are more susceptible to long-term health problems affecting the brain, lungs, hearing or vision," she says.

Among preemies, there are huge differences between those born at 35 weeks and 24 weeks, says Associate Professor Zubair Amin, head and senior consultant at the Department of Neonatology in the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute at NUH.

Moderate to late preterm babies may need a few days' stay in a nursery before going home. But preterm infants born before 28 weeks are expected to stay four to six months in a neonatal intensive care unit or special care nursery.

He says many preemies "are able to make very significant strides towards catching up" and adds that family support plays a crucial role helping them thrive.

"A supportive family can make a significant improvement in a premature baby's development."

Eight-year-old thrives in mathematics

Ng Jian Xuan deftly shoots a soft football into a corner of the living room over and over, while his two younger brothers, aged six and three, play nearby.

To his parents, simply seeing their eldest child kicking a football is something they could not have imagined eight years ago.

Born at 24 weeks, he weighed merely 729g.

"I was quite heartbroken because my baby was so small. You never imagine that your baby would be this size," says his mother, Ms Wong Yen Hong, 36, of the first time she and her husband saw him in the neonatal intensive care unit at the National University Hospital (NUH).

After about four months in the neonatal intensive care unit, he had grown big enough to be taken home, but the family had a challenging first year of parenthood.

As premature babies are sometimes known to stop breathing because their lungs are immature, the couple kept a constant vigil in the early months, checking on him while he slept despite having a baby monitor.

The many visits to the doctor were taxing, but because of these regular checks, they found out that Jian Xuan has mild hearing loss and cannot hear sounds below 30 to 40 decibels.

"Our hearts sank a bit," says his father, Mr Terence Ng, 39, an engineering manager.

They grappled with the recommendation to give their baby a hearing aid before he turned one. "He's still a baby, still developing, maybe after one year, he might be fine," Ms Wong, a human resource manager, recalls wondering then.

Following the NUH experts' advice proved beneficial, though, as Jian Xuan improved under regular speech therapy sessions.

The Ngs enrolled him in an Early Intervention Programme for



Infants and Children Centre run by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, in addition to regular pre-school.

Today, the energetic Primary 2 boy attends Canossian Primary, a mainstream school that caters to kids with hearing loss.

He takes two subjects – English and mathematics – and delighted his parents by coming in third in the school's recent mathematics championship.

"To us, it's a bonus because, obviously, we want him to be healthy – that's the main thing," Mr Ng says.

The couple say a strong support system of medical experts, family, friends and colleagues is important for parents of preemies.

Ms Wong's former boss, for instance, allowed her to pump breast milk at work every three hours and rush to the hospital every day to



Ng Jian Xuan as a baby (left) and now at eight (above left), with his father Terence Ng; brother Yuan Jun, six; mother Wong Yen Hong; and brother Guan Eu, three. PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID, WONG YEN HONG

deliver it to her son while he was in the neonatal intensive care unit.

Such cheerleaders gave the couple strength and hope through the ups and downs of their journey that "things will eventually work out", says Ms Wong.

Sharing their story is their way of showing other parents in the same predicament that "it's not all gloomy, it's not the end of the world", Mr Ng says.

"There are a lot of things you can look forward to."