

Separation of twins a career highlight

In 1987, when Heather Glen was asked to be part of a surgical team to separate conjoined twins at Waikato Hospital, she thought it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But three years ago, she was part of the team that successfully separated another set of twins. Wintec student journalist Holly McKay reports.

ON October 6, 2004, Waikato Hospital paediatric charge nurse Heather Glen held a five-month-old baby girl in her arms.

As she put the little girl in the arms of her mother, there were tears and laughter. But mostly heartfelt relief.

"There was absolute elation. I can't properly describe it. Handing that baby over was just the most amazing feeling," she says.

Heather was part of the surgical team that successfully separated conjoined twin girls born earlier that year at Waikato Hospital.

When she handed over the baby girl, it was the first time the parents had held their daughters separately. Heather says it is a moment she will keep forever. She says the operation, which took more than 23 hours, was exhausting. "I was there for all of it bar 1½ hours - about 25 altogether as I was there early in the morning. You can tell from the bags under my eyes. I think we all turned up looking like we'd already done the operation, which we had in our minds, over and over again."

The operation was also ground-breaking. The twins, Abbey and Sarah (their surname has not been made public to protect their privacy), were joined at the lower spine and pelvis. There have been fewer than 30 cases of similar successful separations worldwide, and this was the first in Australasia.

But it was not the first time Heather Glen had been involved in an operation to separate conjoined twins.

Twenty years earlier, on September 17, 1987, she was part of the team that successfully separated one-day-old twin girls at Waikato Hospital. In that case, the girls were joined mainly by skin and shared part of a liver, and the operation took three hours.

Heather says she remembers feeling "terrified yet excited" when she found out she would be taking part in the first operation. She had been nursing for 18 years but had never experienced anything like it.

"I tried to treat it like any other big operation, as one does. I don't remember any specific directive to keep it from colleagues like we did for the second (2004) operation which was kept very secret. That was very difficult."

She says team work was the key to both successful operations.

"That's the most amazing thing about the operation -



PICTURE: Supplied

HELPING HAND: Nurse Heather Glen has twice been involved in operations to separate conjoined twins - both at Waikato Hospital.

Heather says she never imagined in her "wildest dreams" that she would be involved in two successful operations.

The chances of giving birth to conjoined twins are between one in 50,000 and one in 100,000. Nearly half are stillborn and three-quarters of those who survive birth die within a day.

Only four sets of twins have survived birth in New Zealand and two sets have been successfully separated, both at Waikato Hospital.

She says the build-up to the operations was the most difficult time. "Once you are settled it's like any big operation - you realise you've got everything; you haven't forgotten anything. You start to relax."

The operations have been the highlights of her career.

"Absolutely, I think that's the case for everybody involved."

Abbey and Sarah, who will turn three in October, were discharged from Waikato Hospital three weeks after

you have all these teams all coming together to work together for a common goal; it's really tremendous."

The clinical team for the 2004 operation included three paediatric surgeons, two orthopaedic surgeons, a plastic surgeon and a neurosurgeon, plus 20 nurses, four paediatric anaesthetists and support staff. It was led by paediatric surgeon Askar Kukkady. One of the paediatric surgeons, David Clews, has since died. His challenge was to separate the spines.

the operation and since then have returned to Waikato Hospital a number of times for reconstructive surgery.

In May this year, the twins featured in a television documentary that covered their lives before and after the successful operation.

The first separated twins, Tahlia and Ashleigh, now live in Western Australia with their family. Their mother declined to be interviewed.