

FINDING CARE

## Zainab's journey



Zainab Jabbar, 11, of Baghdad holds flower petals in the backyard of her temporary home in Clifton, where she and her mother are staying with a local family while she receives care for severe scoliosis, a debilitating curvature of the spine. In an X-ray, below right, taken two weeks after her second surgery, metal rods can be seen that are helping straighten Zainab's back.

### An Iraqi girl travels to Clifton for life-changing surgery



Zainab is nervous as she holds her mother's hand before having surgery at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson to help correct her severe scoliosis. Members of her host family and St. Joseph's staff surround her bedside.

By **BETSY QUERNA**  
Herald News

The mood is tense. Zainab Jabbar, an 11-year old with severe scoliosis, a debilitating curvature of the spine, lies in a stretcher just minutes away from life-changing surgery.

Her mother, Azhar, sits next to her, as she has for weeks, ever since Zainab entered St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson. She sits stiffly, her face raw with tears. Sometimes she leans in to her daughter to comfort the girl, and likely herself. It's hard for Azhar to relax. She has waited more than a decade and brought her daughter here from their home in Baghdad for this operation.

Zainab's father calls their cellphone from Iraq. He tells his daughter that he is too nervous to eat. She tells him not to worry, that Mom will cook for them all when they come home.

Zainab's mischievous personality is all that lightens the mood. When she wins a hand of Uno, the card game, she smiles and points under her bed sheets, saying, "I got cards over here."

Born with severe scoliosis, Zainab leans severely to her left side. Her shoulders are lopsided and, on an X-ray, her spine looks like a meandering river winding up her back. She tires easily and can

walk only short distances because her spine curves into her right lung, impeding her breathing. Without surgery, she likely would have lost function in her legs, doctors at St. Joseph's say.

"We do a lot of scoliosis surgeries, and this is definitely (one of) the most complex we've had," says Dr. Arash Emami, an orthopedic surgeon. The curvature of Zainab's spine is unusually high, he says,

extending to the base of her skull. She also had a bone ridge, splitting her spinal cord in two. Babies born in the United States with a deformity this severe would likely undergo surgery in the first weeks of life, says Dr. Richard Anderson, a neurosurgeon at St. Joseph's.

Once, Iraq may have offered such surgery, Azhar says through a translator. But international sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait led to deterioration of the country's medical system. Then, in 2003, the war began and doctors — who had offered hope as Zainab was growing up — told her parents that help would not come from inside the country. "Before the war (the hospital system) wasn't good," says Azhar through a translator. "Now it's completely nothing."

Day-to-day living in Iraq presented



Photos by  
**KEVIN R. WEXLER**/  
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**On the Web**

Share the sights and sounds of Zainab Jabbar's life-changing procedure at [northjersey.com/hn](http://northjersey.com/hn).

Please see **ZAINAB, C4**

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