

Twins defy doctors and start at school

A SET of Saltcoats twins headed off for their first day of school yesterday, defying the fatal predictions of doctors when the boys were born almost four months premature.

Born an incredible 15 weeks early, Michael and Joe McIlhatton (5) were the smallest surviving set of twins in the UK at the time, weighing just over 11b each at birth, with doctors advising their parents to get them named straight away as their chances of survival were as low as 5 per cent.

An agonizing four months of uncertainty followed as the twins were kept in hospital in Newcastle - where the family were living at the time - and had to undergo major heart surgery, lung surgery, countless blood transfusions and nine different instances when the boys died and had to be resuscitated.

Mum, Pauline McPhee explained: "If you're in hospital and you've broken your leg or you have cancer, at least you have some idea of what's going to happen next but we just had no idea.

"As the boys kept surviving and showed themselves to be fighters, the doctors' predictions on their chances of survival was going up to around 50 per cent and we were getting more and more hope as they reached each milestone.

"The doctors still said though that it was very uncommon to take both twins home alive and even if we did get them home, they said that a lot of premature babies don't survive their first winter at home.

"We were told that it was unlikely they'd ever crawl, talk or walk, that they'd probably develop asthma, learning disabilities, epilepsy and there was a good chance that Michael would have cerebral palsy."

Predictions for baby Michael were somewhat gloomier than for his twin brother as Michael was born not breathing, had to have urgent surgery to correct a collapsed lung and remained on oxygen therapy at home until he was almost two years old.

Describing the boys as "wee miracles", Pauline explains that, five years on, the boys have not experienced any of the significant health problems that doctors warned of, that they are not particularly small for their age and were given the all clear by paediatricians at follow-up appointments two years ago.

Despite Michael and Joe's defiance of all the odds, mum Pauline understandably describes herself as still

by ANNA BLYTH

tending to be over-protective about their development and often worried about the boys coming to any harm.

She has, however, kept in touch with parents in similar situations who she met in the Special Care Baby Unit in Newcastle and parents from across the UK who are involved with the support group, the Premature Baby Association.

In explaining her reasons for wanting to tell her story, Pauline said: "I'd love to take this opportunity to thank my family and friends for all their support and all the staff in all the hospitals we've attended with the boys who were so good with us.

"I also want to say a special thank you to Jillian Wigton from the Busy Bees Nursery in Ardrossan who has been such a help to me emotionally.

"Nobody will ever let you have hope when you've got a premature baby but I'd like someone reading my story to be able to get a bit of hope

from it."

Michael and Joe will be attending Winton Primary School in Ardrossan and are pictured in their brand new school uniforms.

