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section

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Dr. Koop was 'deeply affected' by death of his famous patient

# Shares grief

## *Twin's doctor flies to her funeral*

Francisco Matos  
*Special to The Inquirer*

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — The Philadelphia doctor who helped separate Altagracia Rodriguez from her Siamese twin sister Clara in a rare operation two years ago says he has been "deeply affected by her death."

Altagracia, who was 3 last month, choked to death last Friday after a piece of bean lodged in her throat.

Dr. Everett Koop, who headed the surgical team that operated on the twins at Children's Hospital, Philadelphia, flew to the Dominican Republic to be with the Rodriguez family and attended the child's funeral.

"Since my wife and I lost a son in an accident, I thought we could be of help and moral support to her family," Dr. Koop said at a press conference here Monday night. "I love these people, who made me their adopted son ... Since I shared their joy when the girl was separated through the operation, I wanted as well to be present now to share their grief and mourning."

He said that Clara, the surviving twin, was quite healthy and was not likely to suffer adverse psychological effects because of her sister's death.

"Since she's so young, she cannot know what's going on," he said.

"Altagracia did not die because of lack of medical care," Dr. Koop emphasized, "but because a piece of bean that she ingested was too big for her tiny (throat)."

The doctor spoke at the child's funeral in the little town of San Jose de Ocoa Sunday, saying that even if the accident had occurred in his medical office, he could have done nothing to save her.

In an interview, Altagracia's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Salvador Rodriguez, described the circumstances of their daughter's death.

The family was spending a few days at the village of Las Auyamas, where they own a small cottage that houses a grocery and living quarters. Rodriguez has commuted there from the house



Altagracia Rodriguez early last year

the government built for the family in San Jose de Ocoa after the operation and its worldwide publicity.

Mrs. Rodriguez was cooking supper Friday night while the child played on a cement patio adjacent to the cottage. An 11-year-old girl who helped Mrs. Rodriguez with household chores was watching her. The father was in another village on an errand.

Suddenly, the little girl began coughing and gasping. The babysitter ran to tell Mrs. Rodriguez, who rushed out to the patio to find her child choking, her face turning black. The mother and

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# *Twin's doctor shares grief at funeral*

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some neighbors managed to dislodge a fragment of raw bean from the child's mouth, but she died within three or four minutes.

Nevertheless, in a frantic effort to save her, the neighbors found a jeep and rushed the mother and child to the home of a doctor in San Jose de Ocoa, about 12 miles away.

He said there was nothing to be done, and the child was taken to the San Jose de Ocoa Hospital to Dr. Luis Octavio Medina.

Dr. Medina said that he "tried to perform a miracle" to revive the child but that it was too late.

The Rodriguezes said Altagracia had often

played with uncooked beans but had never tried to eat one. They said they did not know how she found one on the patio.

The funeral was held in the municipal cemetery in San Jose de Ocoa. About 4,000 people attended, including congressmen, the town's mayor and a number of local dignitaries.

Altagracia and her sister were connected at the waist and pelvis when they were born. The attending physician told Mrs. Rodriguez that the babies would die within a few months.

When the two survived and grew healthier, a second doctor was consulted. He said that the twins could grow to adulthood but that it would be

impossible to separate them.

The situation eventually came to the attention of Mrs. Diana Zimnoch of Warrington, Pennsylvania, who called Children's Hospital.

The hospital donated its services. Money raised by Mrs. Zimnoch's church allowed the children and Mrs. Rodriguez to come to Philadelphia for the operation.

The twins were separated in 10 hours of surgery of a type that had been performed successfully only 25 times before. After follow-up surgery, both twins were reported doing well, although Altagracia was considered to be the healthier of the two.