

# Mum's little inspiration

## Poster boy for premie research

Giving back: Vanessa Jeffery with her son Zac, who was born two months premature, right. Ms Jeffery is now training for a triathlon to raise money for early birth research. Picture: Marie Nirme



### KATIE ROBERTSON

LITTLE Zachary put in the hard yards after he was born prematurely – fighting for every breath and every day.

And now it's mum's turn as Vanessa Jeffery prepares for a triathlon to raise funds for the Women and Infants Research Foundation.

Ms Jeffery, from South Perth, spent anxious day after day in the neonatal nursery after Zac was born, from dawn until well after dark, watching over him and the machines monitoring his breathing and heart rate. "That was the hardest part, going home without him," she said.

Zac was born by caesarean after Ms Jeffery developed obstetric cholestasis six months into her pregnancy.

"The day we (she and husband Tim) went to the hospital to have a trace, where they put the heart monitor on the baby, we booked a really early morning appointment," Ms Jeffery said. "We had lunch plans. We thought we'd only be there half an hour.

"But the obstetrician came in and said the blood test results had come back not great, and Zachary wasn't very active.

"They admitted me and he was born two days later."

Zac needed help from a device known as a CPAP machine to help him breathe, and spent some time in a humidicrib. It was four weeks before he was allowed home.

"You don't envisage that's the way it's going to happen," Ms Jeffery said. "But the nurses and doctors at St John of God were amazing. They got him breathing and had taken photos of him, had them printed, and I had them with me when I got back to my room. We had been taken on a tour of the neonatal nursery the night before he was born so they could explain what we might see and what would happen to him."

Now six months old, Zac is a happy, healthy baby. "He's been great, he sleeps through the night, he's hitting most of his milestones," Ms Jeffery said. "Being premature hasn't seemed to hold him back."

She is now training hard for the SunSmart Women's Triathlon, which will be held in March to raise funds for the WIRF. The foundation relies on grants and community donations.

"Tim and I have become really conscious that we want Zac to have a really healthy lifestyle and to be really good

role models for him," Mrs Jeffery said. "For me, it's also that we want to give back to a foundation that is doing such fantastic work for prem babies and pregnancy illnesses."

"I think a lot of people just take for granted that if you get pregnant, you'll have a really healthy pregnancy and you get a really healthy baby at the end of it all, but that's not the reality for a lot of people."

About 3000 babies are born prematurely in WA every year, and WIRF executive director John Newnham says early birth is still the major cause of death and disability in young children.

"We have spent two decades researching how to make early births safer, and now babies born as early as 23 weeks can survive," Prof Newnham said.

"Premature births have an increased rate of cerebral palsy, learning and behavioural difficulties, and lung disease. It is a priority of the foundation to discover how premature birth can be prevented altogether, and we think this is something we will achieve in the coming years."

The triathlon will be held on March 16 at Whitfords Nodes Beach Park, Hillarys.

To enter a team, visit [www.wirf.com.au/triathlon](http://www.wirf.com.au/triathlon).