

Definitely, not your mother's maternity ward

July 21 2009, By Chen May Yee

At Ridgeview Medical Center in Waconia, Minn., women can now give birth in rooms with whirlpool tubs and wi-fi. At Fairview Southdale in Edina, Minn., new moms can hire a massage therapist or a portrait photographer.

Even the Hennepin County Medical Center has upgraded its [maternity](#) ward, with pastel decor and a deep tub for water births.

All three are part of a major marketing offensive by hospitals to win a coveted demographic: mothers.

Thanks to a cultural obsession with pregnancy and babies, new moms are more informed and more demanding than ever. Many come to the hospital clutching "birth plans" and expecting to be indulged. Make them happy, the thinking goes, and they'll become lifelong customers.

Hospitals also covet women for their influence. Eight in 10 mothers take chief responsibility for their children's health care, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. One in 10 women also cares for a sick or aging relative. Earning their loyalty is important in an era when hospitals are highly competitive businesses.

"As we look at the decision makers in the family, we want to make sure we are meeting their needs, as an entry point into the system," said Mike Phelps, vice president of diversified services at Ridgeview.

THE NEW LABOR

The maternity ward has come a long way in 50 years.

In the 1960s, women began resisting the norm of the medicated, doctor-directed birth and demanded a return to natural [childbirth](#). The 1970s brought dads into the delivery room. In the 1980s and 1990s, babies started staying in the room with Mom rather than in a separate nursery.

And today?

"I'd say it's about customer service," said Jeanette Schwartz, clinical director of maternity care at Woodwinds Health Campus in Woodbury, Minn. "It's all about giving moms choices in their care."

Many women have taken childbirth preparation to a new level. Bombarded by marketing from retailers such as Babies "R" Us and Web sites such as babycenter.com, and inspired by reality shows such as "Maternity Ward" and home birth videos on YouTube, this generation has grand ideas about labor and delivery.

Some tour multiple hospitals before deciding where to deliver. Insurance policies mostly let women go where they want, though they might be constrained by where their doctor can practice.

"(Childbirth is) a business that's very competitive," said Ted Blank, director of marketing at HCMC. "It's a planned thing and they have the luxury of shopping around."

At least five metro area hospitals have renovated their maternity facilities or added frills in the past two years. Abbott Northwestern Hospital, which delivers more babies than any other in Minnesota -- 4,200 last year -- plans to renovate its maternity facility this year. No. 2 Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park has no plans to renovate, but recently created five hotel-like suites for women on bed rest and will

start offering spa services next month.

Obstetrics doesn't enjoy the fat profit margins of specialties such as orthopedics or heart care. But it makes up the difference in customer loyalty. For many women, it's their first time in a hospital.

"If that's not a positive experience, they're not likely to come back," said Meri Beth Kennedy, birthplace director at Fairview Southdale, which redid its maternity wing a year ago.

At the same time, many hospitals -- traditionally linoleum-floored and fluorescent-lighted -- are striving to become "healing environments" on the theory that patients recover faster when surrounded by outside views, neutral colors and curved walls.

Finally, there's economic reality. Many Twin Cities hospitals are just coming out of a building spree and simply have to work harder to draw patients. They can't charge more after a renovation, since labor and delivery fees are typically bound by contracts with insurers, but women do pay extra for massages, manicures and nicer linens.

The marketplace is so competitive that Fairview Southdale has an advisory board made up of women who have given birth there.

Enter the luxurious, multiple-choice birthing suite.

Jessie Carlson had toured Woodwinds Health Campus, part of the HealthEast Care System, before she even got pregnant and decided she would give birth there. The 35-year-old yoga teacher from Minneapolis had always been interested in an active childbirth and researched "slings and ropes and other non-traditional positions rather than lying in bed."

But when the time came, all she wanted was to labor in a bath tub while

her husband, Chris, ran warm water over her back to ease the pain. Then she climbed into a special birthing tub, the size of a small boat, and closed her eyes. With her husband holding her from behind, her mother holding one leg and her sister holding the other, she brought little Isabel into the world.

"I felt very empowered," she said 36 hours later, holding her baby and looking blissful. "It was my own show."

MARKET RESEARCH

Ridgeview's renovation has been in the planning for years. Hospital executives visited Woodwinds, which has such a reputation in the "healing environment" movement that hospital officials visit from as far as Japan. One laboring woman recently drove 90 minutes to give birth there rather than in her hometown of Rochester, home of Mayo Clinic.

The Ridgeview crew also went to the Aurora Women's Pavilion in West Allis, Wis., which one described as the Taj Mahal of women's health.

Ridgeview's center is the first part of a two-year, \$12 million expansion in women's and children's services. Of that, \$2.5 million came from philanthropy. The center houses six birthing suites, 18 post-partum suites and two ante-partum rooms for those who need bed rest before delivery. They installed birthing tubs with whirlpools in several bathrooms. There's a sun-filled family room and a massage room.

This fall, specialist nurses from Children's Hospitals and Clinics will be on site to help care for premature babies. A neonatal intensive care unit will open in a year, with inpatient pediatrics coming later.

At the grand opening last month, more than 1,000 people showed up, double the crowd that came for a heart institute opening two years

earlier.

Brenda Morris of St. Bonifacius was one of the many women with protruding bellies waiting to get in. Morris, 24, is due next month. She took one look at the birthing tubs with whirlpools and decided on Ridgeview instead of her original choice, St. Francis Regional Medical Center in Shakopee.

"Everything was updated," Morris said. "They had beautiful tiles, iridescent, and a rain showerhead in the bathroom. It just looked like going to spend a couple of days at the spa."

The wireless Internet was another big draw. Morris' husband is a specialist with the National Guard in Kuwait. She plans on having him attend the birth via webcam.

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