

Florida allows doctors to perform C-sections outside of hospitals

May 30 2024, by Phil Galewitz, KFF Health News



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Florida has become the first state to allow doctors to perform cesarean sections outside of hospitals, siding with a private equity-owned physicians group that says the change will lower costs and give pregnant

women the homier birthing atmosphere that many desire.

But the hospital industry and the nation's leading obstetricians' association say that even though some Florida hospitals have closed their maternity wards in recent years, performing C-sections in doctor-run clinics will increase the risks for women and babies when complications arise.

"A pregnant patient that is considered low-risk in one moment can suddenly need lifesaving care in the next," Cole Greves, an Orlando perinatologist who chairs the Florida chapter of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, said in an email to KFF Health News. The new birth clinics, "even with increased regulation, cannot guarantee the level of safety patients would receive within a hospital."

This spring, a law was enacted allowing "advanced birth centers," where physicians can deliver babies vaginally or by C-section to women deemed at low risk of complications. Women would be able to stay overnight at the clinics.

Women's Care Enterprises, a private equity-owned physicians group with locations mostly in Florida along with California and Kentucky, lobbied the [state legislature](#) to make the change. BC Partners, a London-based investment firm, bought Women's Care in 2020.

"We have patients who don't want to deliver in a hospital, and that breaks our heart," said Stephen Snow, who recently retired as an OB-GYN with Women's Care and testified before the Florida Legislature advocating for the change in 2018.

Brittany Miller, vice president of strategic initiatives with Women's Care, said the group would not comment on the issue.

Health experts are leery.

"What this looks like is a poor substitute for quality obstetrical care effectively being billed as something that gives people more choices," said Alice Abernathy, an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. "This feels like a bad band-aid on a chronic issue that will make outcomes worse rather than better," Abernathy said.

Nearly one-third of U.S. births occur via C-section, the surgical delivery of a baby through an incision in the mother's abdomen and uterus. Generally, doctors use the procedure when they believe it is safer than vaginal delivery for the parent, the baby, or both. Such medical decisions can take place months before birth, or in an emergency.

Florida state Sen. Gayle Harrell, the Republican who sponsored the birth center bill, said having a C-section outside of a hospital may seem like a radical change, but so was the opening of outpatient surgery centers in the late 1980s.

Harrell, who managed her husband's OB-GYN practice, said birth centers will have to meet the same high standards for staffing, infection control, and other aspects as those at outpatient surgery centers.

"Given where we are with the need, and maternity deserts across the state, this is something that will help us and help moms get the best care," she said.

Seventeen hospitals in the state have closed their maternity units since 2019, with many citing low insurance reimbursement and high malpractice costs, according to the Florida Hospital Association.

Mary Mayhew, CEO of the Florida Hospital Association, said it is wrong

to compare birth centers to ambulatory surgery centers because of the many risks associated with C-sections, such as hemorrhaging.

The Florida law requires advanced birth centers to have a transfer agreement with a hospital, but it does not dictate where the facilities can open nor their proximity to a hospital.

"We have serious concerns about the impact this model has on our collective efforts to improve maternal and infant health," Mayhew said. "Our hospitals do not see this in the best interest of providing quality and safety in labor and delivery."

Despite its opposition to the new birth centers, the Florida Hospital Association did not fight passage of the overall bill because it also included a major increase in the amount Medicaid pays hospitals for maternity care.

Mayhew said it is unlikely that the birth centers would help address care shortages. Hospitals are already struggling with a shortage of OB-GYNs, she said, and it is unrealistic to expect advanced birth centers to open in rural areas with a large proportion of people on Medicaid, which pays the lowest reimbursement for labor and delivery care.

It is unclear whether insurers will cover the advanced birth centers, though most insurers and Medicaid cover care at midwife-run birth centers. The advanced birth centers will not accept emergency walk-ins and will treat only patients whose insurance contracts with the facilities, making them in-network.

Snow, the retired OB-GYN with Women's Care, said the group plans to open an advanced birth center in the Tampa or Orlando area.

The advanced birth center concept is an improvement on midwife care

that enables deliveries outside of hospitals, he said, as the centers allow women to stay overnight and, if necessary, offer anesthesia and C-sections.

Snow acknowledged that, with a private equity firm invested in Women's Care, the birth center idea is also about making money. But he said hospitals have the same profit incentive and, like midwives, likely oppose the idea of centers that can provide C-sections because they could cut into hospital revenue.

"We are trying to reduce the cost of medicine, and this would be more cost-effective and more pleasant for patients," he said.

Kate Bauer, executive director of the American Association of Birth Centers, said patients could confuse advanced birth centers with the existing, free-standing birth centers for low-risk births that have been run by midwives for decades. There are currently 31 licensed birth centers in Florida and 411 free-standing birth centers in the United States, she said.

"This is a radical departure from the standard of care," Bauer said. "It's a bad idea," she said, because it could increase risks to mom and baby.

No other state allows C-sections outside of hospitals. The only facility that offers similar care is a [birth](#) clinic in Wichita, Kansas, which is connected by a short walkway to a hospital, Wesley Medical Center.

The clinic provides "hotel-like" maternity suites where staffers deliver about 100 babies a month, compared with 500 per month in the hospital itself.

Morgan Tracy, a maternity nurse navigator at the center, said the concept works largely because the hospital and birthing suites can share staff and

pharmacy access, plus patients can be quickly transferred to the main [hospital](#) if complications arise.

"The beauty is there are team members on both sides of the street," Tracy said.

2024 KFF Health News. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Florida allows doctors to perform C-sections outside of hospitals (2024, May 30)
retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-florida-doctors-sections-hospitals.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.