

# The Birth Center Experience

Birth Centers Lead Cost Containment Efforts While Providing Quality Care

"Few innovations in health service promote lower cost, greater availability, and a high degree of satisfaction with a comparable degree of safety. The results of this study suggest that modern birth centers can identify women who are at low risk for obstetrical complications and care for them in a way that provides these benefits."

New England Journal of Medicine, 12/28/89

## What is a birth center?

- The birth center is a homelike facility, existing within a healthcare system with a program of care designed in the wellness model of pregnancy and birth.
- Birth centers are guided by principles of prevention, sensitivity, safety, appropriate medical intervention, and cost effectiveness.
- Birth centers provide family-centered care for healthy women before, during and after normal pregnancy, labor and birth.

## What is the birth center experience?

- The quality of care in birth centers reported in the "The National Birth Center Study" reflects the low overall intrapartum and neonatal mortality rate of 1.3/1000 births; 0.7/1000 if lethal anomalies are excluded. These rates are comparable to studies of low risk, in-hospital births.<sup>1</sup>
- The cesarean section rate for women receiving care in birth centers averages 4.4%, approximately one half that in studies of low risk, in-hospital births.<sup>1</sup>
- Birth centers nationally have consistently displayed charges for care for normal birth that average up to 50% less than regular hospital stays and 30% less than short stays - including practitioner fees.<sup>2, 3</sup>
- More than half of birth centers include routine laboratory exams, childbirth education, home visits, extra office visits, and initial newborn examinations in their charges.
- Most major health insurers reimburse contract with birth centers for reimbursement.

Because charges reflect cost and since the birth center is a single service unit, there is no opportunity for cost shifting or operating the birth center as a "loss leader" to other services.

- 98.8 percent of women using the birth center would recommend it to friends and/or return to the center for a subsequent birth.<sup>1</sup>

## What are the benefits to families?

- The birth center approaches pregnancy and birth as a normal family event until proven otherwise. The program encourages family involvement and provides a safe environment for families to experience the social, emotional, and spiritual renewal inherent in birthing forth new life -- while attending to the possibility that a problem may arise that will require medical intervention or care in the acute care setting of the hospital. This is in opposition to the view that pregnancy is an illness and birth a medical/surgical event that needs to be cured.
- The birth center program of education encourages parents to become informed and self-reliant; to assume responsibility for their own health and the health of the family.
- The birth center brings generations together to celebrate new life by encouraging grandparents and children to participate in the birth center program.
- Birth centers have demonstrated that they are a viable alternative to unattended home birth and to costly hospital acute care for 25 years. It is now time to mainstream these services.

## The Birth Center Experience

### **What are the benefits to business & industry?**

- Birth centers offer business and industry direct savings in the cost of health benefits. If only 100,00 births were attended in birth centers, annual savings could be almost \$314 million.<sup>2, 3</sup>
- The birth center program provides a starting base for the wellness and prevention programs being established in industry.
- The family in the hinge pin of the employee. Industry's support of a program that encourages family unity, self-determination and responsible health can only improve employee performance.
- Birth center care encourages childbearing women (who may also be employees) to be confident in the design of their bodies. Such confidence, in turn, builds self-esteem and starts the young family off on thinking of pregnancy, birth and family health as wellness, not disease.
- The nine-month intensive focus on improving family health by promotion of lifestyle changes in pregnancy can have a significant ripple effect in the long-term improvement of family health.

### **How will it affect the hospital acute care service?**

- Birth centers have had a major impact on humanizing the acute care maternity services provided by hospitals. Note the rise in hospital birthing rooms, in privileges for nurse-midwives, in childbirth education programs, and in more liberal attitudes about family participation.
- Birth centers are showing that the majority of women can safely proceed through pregnancy and birth using acute care services only as needed. In a wellness orientation to pregnancy and birth, birth centers would be the managed care gatekeepers for the acute care obstetric newborn services.
- Birth centers eventually will help to reduce the number of costly hospital beds and expand primary care services.

- Birth centers will help to reduce dependency fostered by institutional confinement and strengthen the family's ability to share responsibility for maternity care and family health.
- Birth centers will help to develop a system of care based first, on the needs of the family and second, on the needs of medical education or product promotion.

### **How will it affect the obstetricians?**

- Birth centers provide an opportunity for obstetricians and family physicians to learn and practice midwifery - time and education intensive, "with woman" - care.
- Birth centers provide an opportunity for obstetricians to invest in a service in which they can expand their interests, develop teams of professional care providers that will improve primary care services to families and better use their specialist skills.

### **How is the quality of care assured in birth centers?**

- Through the promotion of state regulations for licensure (37 states currently license birth centers).
- Through established National Standards (adopted 1985).
- Through a Continuous Quality Improvement Program for Birth Centers (model program available).
- Through accreditation by the Commission for the Accreditation of Birth Centers (CABC).

### **How do birth centers contain costs?**

- By retaining autonomy (control) over birth center operations and program regardless of ownership (some hospitals own freestanding birth centers).
- By providing "high touch" rather than "high tech" care, birth centers minimize the overuse of technology.

## The Birth Center Experience

- By providing a program of primary care that emphasizes education, wellness, prevention, self-help and self-reliance in family health maintenance.
- By using staff efficiently; staff are only in-house when a mother is in-house. Since birth centers do not compete with emergency services or hospital acute care, levels of staff are used efficiently and appropriately.
- By sharing responsibility with the childbearing family for health and prevention of illness.
- By using existing community services when available (instead of creating costly duplications) for transport services, social services, medical consultation, laboratories, etc.
- By using established policies and procedures for screening and transfer of women with problems to acute care services.
- By using low cost construction that meets safety codes.

## REFERENCES

1. Rooks, J., et al., "Outcomes of Care in Birth Centers: The National Birth Center Study", *New England Journal of Medicine*, 321:1804-1811, (December 28), 1989
2. Health Insurance Association of America, *Source Book of Health Insurance Data - 1996*, 1996, Washington, DC.
3. American Association of Birth Centers (a.k.a. National Association of Childbearing Center), *Annual Survey Report of Birth Center Experience, 2000*, Perkiomenville, PA.
4. Rooks, J., et al., "The National Birth Center Study: Part I - Methodology and Prenatal Care and Referrals", *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery*, Vol. 37, No. 4: 222-253, July/August, 1992
5. Rooks, J., et al., "The National Birth Center Study: Part II - Intrapartum and Immediate Postpartum Neonatal Care", *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery*, Vol. 37, No. 5: 301-340, September/October, 1992
6. Rooks, J., et al., "The National Birth Center Study: Part III - Intrapartum and Immediate Postpartum Neonatal Complications and Transfers, Postpartum and Neonatal Care, Outcomes and Client Satisfaction", *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery*, Vol. 37, No. 6: 361-397, November/December, 1992