

Rocky Mountain News

Hospitals race to replace sterile wards with lavish suites

By Rachel Brand, Rocky Mountain News
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Financial pressure on the health care system from uninsured and Medicaid patients hasn't stopped area hospitals from pouring millions of dollars into their maternity wards. The notion is simple: Beautiful suites will attract upscale families that more likely can afford the cost of care. Furthermore, happy mothers become lifelong hospital customers.

Facing stiff competition from newer suburban hospitals, older area hospitals have reinvested and spruced up their wards. Within the past three years, at least six metro-area hospitals have renovated their maternity suites, while five medical centers with state-of-the-art maternity wards have been built from scratch.

This building boom is an effort to keep up with changing medical practice as well as woo more discriminating patients.

In January 2004 the University of Colorado Hospital opened a 10-bed "birth center" as part of the Anschutz Inpatient Pavilion.

The ward features beige-carpeted halls, private rooms with flat-screen televisions and gentle, curving architecture, in addition to sofa sleepers and Internet access for tired or busy dads.

Every patient gets a rose on the bed when they're admitted, and those forced to ride a gurney can relax by looking at pastoral scenes on the ceiling.

Similarly, St. Joseph Hospital renovated its 37-bed wing. Now patients soak in a Jacuzzi in a tiled portion of their room or receive a lavender oil foot massage. Although St. Joe's is the busiest hospital in the metro area, delivering between 420 and 450 babies a month, its halls are quiet, and the nurses monitor babies' health via a flat-screen monitor in a sequestered room away from the public eye.

Hospitals say these bells and whistles are necessary to attract patients. Births account for one-third of hospital admissions in Colorado, and maternity services are among the few services patients choose, rather than being forced to accept. And as women have fewer babies, moms want the "birth day" to feel like a special event.

"Moms do shop for where they want to have their baby," said Holly Fedak, senior director, women's and children's services at St. Joe. "They expect the clinical expertise."

In Colorado, these changes are part of a broader move to expand services as the Front Range population grows. They also are the latest stage of an ongoing evolution in maternity care.

In the 1960s, birth was considered a medical procedure requiring sterile, compartmentalized settings. Women labored in one room, delivered in another and recovered in a third - and the baby was whisked to a nursery after birth.

As the feminist movement of the 1970s took hold, women demanded more control over and choices about their baby's birth. Three rooms shrank to one, and in the next decade midwife-staffed birthing centers in comfy Victorian homes became the rage.

Hospitals fought back. In the 1990s, they made maternity wards more like home, adding chintz-covered sleepers and private rooms.

The twin forces of hospital competition and consumerism united in the late 1990s, and hospitals have come to resemble five-star hotels in their service, food and hours.

Cherry Garcia ice cream

Hospitals such as Rose Medical Center have long offered luxury rooms for a limited population - often professional athletes or high-powered business folks - willing to pay extra for high-end services. That market is small, and it's limited to top hospitals that specialize in treating illnesses such as cancer.

But hospitals sprucing up maternity wards are expanding luxury services to the mainstream, and they don't charge extra for most of the amenities.

At Sky Ridge Medical Center, the standard menu includes roasted sea bass with citrus chutney, mushroom bisque and Cherry Garcia ice cream. Both Presbyterian/St. Luke's Hospital and Good Samaritan offer complimentary mommy massages. And Swedish Medical Center offers free on-site classes for each new mom.

"You have your own room. It's just like a five-star hotel," said Loren Sheldon, 26, whose wife, Kyla, gave birth to Allyson at Swedish Medical Center last week.

The amenities are "real important," Sheldon said. "You've got a lot going on; your life is totally changed. The people and the amenities are such a tremendous advantage," he said.

Some of the modern touches in these wards correspond with advanced medical theory. The American Association of Pediatrics now recommends up to a year of breast-feeding, and hospitals such as Littleton Adventist have hired 24-hour-a-day nurses who specialize in instructing mothers on breast-feeding.

Likewise, current theory supports involving the entire family in the baby's care. So maternity rooms are built larger to accommodate family members staying overnight.

It might be surprising for the Sheldons to learn that maternity services are "loss leaders" for hospitals, much like laundry detergent on sale at grocery stores. They're designed to attract customers.

"(Maternity services are) priced in such a way that they are not a heavy winner," said Keith Moore, chief executive officer of McManis Associates, a Greenwood Village hospital consulting firm.

Rather, snazzy maternity wards are essential to doing business. If a hospital doesn't offer them, it risks attracting only patients who can't pay their bills, leading to a drag on revenue.

On the other hand, neonatal intensive care unit services - which seem to go in tandem with high-risk maternity services - can be lucrative, Moore said.

At least seven metro-area hospitals offer Level III neonatal intensive care, the highest and most intense designation.

And hospitals say new facilities and services can help reduce costs. Meals cooked to order help reduce waste. Modern design features help lead to lower overhead, more business, better care and increased patient satisfaction.

Industrial vs. sage

The contrast between old and new is clear on a visit to the University of Colorado's aging facility on the East Ninth Avenue and Colorado Boulevard campus. Women's services will be relocating to Fitzsimons in 2007.

The walls are blue and pink, the floors shiny white linoleum, the lighting fluorescent. A floor-polishing machine whirs loudly.

"This is cold and impersonal. Kind of industrial," said Edwin Heath Jr., director of the Women's & Infants Care Team, on a recent tour. "I'm sorry, but it's true."

By contrast, the reception station at the Anschutz Inpatient Pavilion maternity ward is decorated in muted sage, tan and lavender colors with low lights and a curved desk.

The older campus was state-of-the-art just 10 years ago.

When a patient toured the facility then, she would have been impressed by the large private rooms, private toilet and shower, Formica countertops and reclining sleeper, Heath said. The design is unabashedly medical, but still friendly. And it represents a huge step forward from semiprivate rooms divided by a curtain and metal dispensing tables of a decade earlier.

Still, contemporary hospitals have gone even further toward creating a home-like environment. At great expense, hospitals such as Rose Medical Center hide medical equipment behind sliding pictures or in the bed's headboard. Equipment comes trimmed in matching wood. Showers have been replaced by soaking tubs and Jacuzzis.

The price of these rooms varies as widely as the amenities.

At Boulder Community Foothills Hospital, a two-day, normal delivery costs \$7,518, while the same service costs \$3,000 at Rose. But hospitals caution that these charges don't include the multitude of prompt pay, uninsured and managed care discounts and may not include physician services or fees for the baby's care.

For patients with insurance, hospitals receive a negotiated fee from insurers that is much lower than the hospital's stated room charge.

With insurers increasingly asking patients to cover a part of their inpatient hospital charges, a savvy shopper should visit a hospital's "patient financial services" department and discuss costs ahead of time.

Comparing the birthing suites

Whirlpool In room Hospital When Deliveries bath TV, VCR Internet provides Web Hospital name renovated Cost *Rooms
Nursery per month in room or DVD access Massage doulas* nursery Cost****

Presbyterian/St. Luke's 2002 \$1 million 26 LDR, 19 pp Level III 150 -160 yes yes yes yes no yes \$3,000 *Extras:* Denver's Mother's Milk Bank offers donated milk for babies with allergies

Good Samaritan 2004 n/a 9 LDR, 24 pp, Level II 120 (projected) no yes no yes no yes \$3,200 *Extras:* Offers frozen lasagna and salad for a family of six to go

Sky Ridge Medical Center 2003 n/a 11 LDR, 26 pp Level II 220 no yes yes no no yes \$3,000 *Extras:* Mountain views

Boulder Community Foothills 2003 n/a 10 LDR, 16 pp Level III 160 yes yes yes yes, for a fee no yes \$7,518 *Extras:* Special care neonatal ICU has private rooms with adjoining parent suites

Anschutz Inpatient Pavilion 2004 n/a 5 LDR, 10 pp Level I 35-50 no yes yes yes no yes \$5,437 *Extras:* Pavilion suite, private chef, robe and slippers, L'Occitane soaps, one-on-one nursing

Rose Medical Center 2004 \$2.1 million 12 LDR, 43 pp Level III 330-370 yes yes yes yes yes yes \$3,000 *Extras:* Suites with a private chef, homebaked cookies, carpet, larger rooms, luxury soaps, mountain views

St. Joseph 2004 \$7.1 million 14 LDR, 37 pp Level III 420-430 yes yes yes yes, for a fee no yes \$3,300 *Extras:* Lavender oil foot massage, Jacuzzi tubs

Littleton Adventist 2004 \$2.5 million 15 LDR, 32 pp Level III 150 yes yes yes yes, for a fee no yes \$6,500 *Extras:* 14-bed cubbyholed nursery renovated in 2004; birthday cake for each newborn

Swedish Medical Center 2005 n/a 17 LDR, 31pp Level III 220 no yes no yes, for a fee no yes \$3,000 *Extras:* Free car seat fitting for all new parents; daily classes for new moms

Denver Health Medical Center 2004 \$900,000 11 LDR, 24 pp Level III 305 no yes no no yes no \$5,269 *Extras:* Safety net hospital for Medicaid and uninsured

Parker Adventist Hospital 2004 n/a 19 LDRP suites Level III 75 no yes yes no no no \$6,350 *Extras:* When a baby is in the NICU, parents stay for free in available rooms.

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