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**Neugarten Family
Birth Center
at Northern
Dutchess Hospital
Celebrates 25 Years**

Neugarten Family Birth Center at Northern Dutchess Hospital Celebrates 25 Years

By Claire Curry

CELEBRATING ITS SILVER ANNIVERSARY, THE NEUGARTEN FAMILY BIRTH CENTER AT NORTHERN DUTCHESS HOSPITAL IN RHINEBECK EMBRACES A FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH TO CARE FOR WOMEN BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER PREGNANCY, LABOR AND BIRTH. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IS ENCOURAGED, SO THE ENTIRE EXPERIENCE OF WELCOMING A NEW LIFE IS APPRECIATED TO THE FULLEST. GENERATIONS CAN COME TOGETHER TO INCLUDE GRANDPARENTS AND CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE AND BE INVOLVED, ALL WITHIN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.

Alternative Birthing Practices

Twenty-five years ago, OB/GYN George Verrilli, M.D., along with Dr. Richard Temple and then-CEO Michael Mazarella, realized their vision in establishing the Neugarten Family Birth Center's prepared childbirth program. The center — a warm and inviting building that looks more like a Victorian home than a health care facility — was the very first hospital-affiliated birth center across New York State.

Inspired by the Lamaze technique developed in the 1940s by French obstetrician Fernand Lamaze, M.D., Dr. Verrilli and his team shared the same philosophy — that childbirth is a natural and healthy process — and began offering expectant mothers alternatives during childbirth. The center was embraced by the community and quickly grew from supporting 200 deliveries

Dr. George Verrilli chats with a new mother and baby in the early years of the birth center.



Dr. Dean Bloch and a patient discuss her questions about those first few days.

each year to 500 and more within its first five years, to 800 in the 1970s — a number that has remained consistent to date.

Dr. Verrilli received his medical training in Padua, Italy, and, after completing his residency at New York Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, began practicing at United Hospital in Port Chester, NY, where he launched a “prepared childbirth” initiative. In the early 1960s, he started a joint practice in Rhinebeck and began working at Northern Dutchess Hospital.

Pioneering the Birth Center

It was a phone call from Ludwig Neugarten, M.D., the father of one of Dr. Verrilli’s patients, that led to initial funding for the birth center.

Dr. Neugarten requested to sit in on his daughter’s surgery, and Dr. Verrilli agreed. Impressed with his performance, Dr. Neugarten inquired into his colleague’s aspirations at the hospital. Dr. Verrilli described the trend that was building for birthing centers, along with his own tenets on birthing alternatives. Soon after, the hospital received a substantial donation from the Neugartens, while a drive to raise several million dollars to build a hospital-based birthing center completed the funding, and the doors opened in 1985. Now, 25 years later, the birthing center is widely known in the local community and nationally recognized. The center has earned a five-star HealthGrades rating for maternity care for the past four years. This is the highest rating offered by the independent health care ratings organization.

A Dedicated Team

The Neugarten Family Birth Center provides parents with information and support to make their own choices and create a customized birth plan for a comfortable and joyful experience. The multidisciplinary team includes skilled physicians, nurses, medical technicians, midwives and doulas. Midwives at the center have extensive training in prenatal care, delivery and postpartum care. Their focus is on monitoring both mother and child to assure that labor is progressing normally. The birth center staff also works with doulas hired directly by the patient to assist through labor. The doula provides invaluable support through emotional and physical care, which may include massage or aromatherapy, assisting the mother with labor positions and breathing techniques, offering meditation exercises or acting as a labor coach.

Also of note, mid-level practitioners (nurse practitioners and physician assistants) from the neonatology practice of Physicians Network, PC, also a Health Quest affiliate, are responsible for all newborn routine exams and specialized care. Pediatricians and neonatologists are also available for consultation. After their stay, families will visit their pediatrician of choice for follow-up care.



(Front) Helen Crisman-Janssen, CNM, and Dr. Christine Beer stand by the water tub, another option for laboring mothers at the Neugarten Family Birth Center.

Safety Is Key

“Everyone on the staff is very adaptable,” says Maureen Terranova, M.D., who recently completed a two-year term as chief of obstetrics at the birthing center. She credits the staff for creating a nurturing environment and guiding expectant mothers through the birthing experience using principles of prevention, sensitivity, safety and appropriate medical intervention. “The center is completely supported by the hospital,” says Dr. Terranova. Since the center is part of a 68-bed hospital, patients have access to all of the traditional pain management options and have peace of mind knowing that in the event that a patient needs an emergency C-section, an operating suite is available, and occasionally, high-risk patients are transported to an alternate facility. Rather than view pregnancy as an illness that may require medical intervention, parents are encouraged to become informed and to feel comfortable with birth as a normal family event.

A spouse or partner is permitted to sleep in the room with the mother and baby, although a pediatric nursery is available if moms need more rest. In fact, 24-hour pediatric care is available for newborns, according to Dr. Terranova, allowing new mothers to have as much rest as necessary, with the assurance that their infants are in safe hands. Laboring mothers and those recovering from delivery can also take advantage of on-site massage therapy to relieve pain and promote relaxation.

The state-of-the-art center provides education and support in many areas of expertise throughout the entire course of pregnancy and beyond, including nutrition, pregnancy exercise classes, lactation services, mother and baby exercise classes, sibling classes, childbirth classes, car seat safety checks, infant CPR, play groups, breastfeeding support groups and a postpartum program designed to assist parents in building a support system after returning home. In addition, the center offers alternatives to medication to manage pain. A birthing tub is often used to relieve pain from contractions when women are in labor, and some patients opt to deliver their babies in the tub as well. Families are provided with the

knowledge and options to create a birthing plan that is best suited to their own personal wants and needs.

New Leadership

Dean Bloch, M.D., who assumed the position of Chief of Obstetrics at the center in June 2010 for a rotating, two-year term, notes the remarkable difference between the Neugarten Family Birth Center and his experience at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, where he served patients coping with high-risk pregnancies in the 1980s. “The birth center is a gem,” Dr. Bloch says. “We let the [birthing] process go naturally, without intervening, and do it in a safe way.”

“The birth center that George Verrilli set up is really a birth center that is family-centered obstetrics, supportive of natural childbirth,” Dr. Bloch says. “That’s the central core of what the birth center did, and it is still the central core. That hasn’t changed. What has changed is the practice. We would do things back then that the standard of care won’t allow for anymore. We would do breach deliveries. If someone had two or three

Cesarean sections, we would let them labor. We had a tendency philosophically to recognize that labor is a natural process, and we didn’t ‘medicimize’ it.”

However, the practice of medicine has changed during the birth center’s lifespan. Today, it offers more options for anesthesia to patients who want or need it; breach vaginal deliveries are a thing of the past; and many women have vaginal deliveries despite a history of C-sections.

Dr. Bloch also credits the skilled hospital staff for offering support, as well as the team of nurses and midwives who often work long shifts and whose hearts are truly in their work. “We have a wonderful staff at the hospital,” he says. “They are well-trained and committed.”

Birthing ‘Consultants’

The center supports patients through focusing on nutrition, exercise and well-being during pregnancy, explains Dr. Bloch, also a licensed acupuncturist who is board certified in holistic medicine in addition to his medical training. For more than two

Dr. Maureen Terranova speaks with a family about their experience welcoming their baby boy into the world.





Lisa McNally, R.N.; Marsha Shapiro, R.N.; Ely Nathan, M.D.; and Amy Mincher, R.N.; are part of the health care team at the birth center.

decades, Dr. Bloch has devoted himself to helping patients create their own birthing plans and follow them through. “I’m the consultant,” he explains, “I don’t need to make any decisions [on behalf of patients]. I am merely a guide standing on the shoulder of the pilot of their life. I explain the options, the pros and cons, and patients choose their own birth plans.”

Dr. Bloch received his training at the University of Vermont Medical School and Columbia Presbyterian Medical School. He has also returned to the classroom to earn a second master’s degree in metabolic medicine. He is currently doing a fellowship with the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, and he mentioned his interest in epigenetics. “It’s an outcropping of new information that is out there,” he says. “The thinking is that you can control your genes by your behavior. We now find that the way you live determines how the gene will express itself.” Dr. Bloch references obesity as an example: someone may have a gene for obesity, but their lifestyle may include a nutritious diet and exercise. In that case, the obesity gene may never “express itself.”

He also points to relearning physiology, something he learned decades ago, but also an area that is much more informed today. “I have to go back and relearn it, so I can understand even more the interrelationship between thyroid, pituitary functions . . . adrenal functions and how that influences the reproductive hormones.” There is so much more information coming out, and it all influences the reproductive system. One key area of interest is nutrition. “I never thought I’d be known as the guy who talks about veggies!” Dr. Bloch believes nutrition is key to a healthy pregnancy and does make a difference when it comes to childbirth.

Michelle Muller, LMT, gives a new mom a massage, one of the many special touches offered at the birth center.





The Neugarten Family Birth Center celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, culminating with a “birthday party” on September 15.

Dr. Bloch hopes his continuing education will further inform his work in obstetrics and gynecology. “I’ve been practicing for 23 years, and I love it more than I ever have,” he adds. “I’m using the tools I was given and learning about other tools that are out there, such as the impact nutrition has on pregnancy.”

Progressive Birthing Options

When the center first opened 25 years ago, Dr. Verrilli says he was called a “charlatan” for his forward-thinking, natural

Special contests and events have been held all year round for the 25th anniversary, including a new website, www.NDHKnowsBabies.com.



approach to pregnancy, labor, delivery and postpartum care. “Other doctors would say, ‘What do you mean, no IV?’” Dr. Verrilli dedicated himself to practicing alternative methods that still ensured the safety and well-being of mothers and their newborns. When nurses saw patients walking down the hall with their babies 20 minutes after giving birth, they were converted, explains Dr. Verrilli, a father of seven who retired as an obstetrician last year and continues to practice gynecology. Since the 1980s, prepared childbirth has gained popularity, and more and more women travel from near and far to choose this family-centered option.

The center underwent a major renovation and expansion in 2000 and continues to evolve as a program of primary care that emphasizes education, wellness, prevention, self-help and self-reliance in family health maintenance. The birth center’s renovations for a new look are almost complete and will be available for public viewing during a “25th birthday party” for the community on September 15. Staff and families who have attended the center look forward to celebrating 25 years of devotion to the health and wellness inherent in birthing forth new life. Dr. Verrilli concludes, “I’m very proud of what we achieved.” ■