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Midwives aim to bring birth process full circle

ADA – In a rapidly advancing world, the midwives at The Women’s Clinic offer a refreshingly holistic and age-old alternative to a strictly medical childbirth, bringing full circle a tried-and-true method of caring for mothers and their newborn babies.

“It’s important to listen to your mothers and really support what they believe in,” said Tamar Windsor, APRN-CNM. “It’s more like a team effort between you and the patient and their family, not just you telling the patient what to do. Empower her through childbirth because that makes her a stronger mother. To believe in that woman, no matter who she is or what environment she comes from, and to treat her with respect, that’s what midwifery is all about.”

Windsor is a member of the team of Certified Nurse Midwives at The Women’s Clinic, along with Natasha Estep, APRN-CNM, and Rachel Sloan, APRN-CNM. She has delivered a multitude of babies, including two of Estep’s daughters.

“I had Tamar as my midwife,” Estep said. “She made such an impact on me and empowered me so much during my pregnancy that I thought, ‘This is what I want to do with my life.’ Later, I actually trained Rachel (Sloan). I did my clinicals with Tamar, and Rachel did her clinicals with me. And now we’re all here together. It’s been like a big circle.”

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The circle theme doesn't stop there. While Windsor earned her master's degree in midwifery from Philadelphia University, Estep and Sloan earned their master's degrees from Frontier Nursing University in Kentucky.

"Frontier was founded by Mary Breckinridge in the Appalachian Mountains," Estep said. "She saw that women and children were dying in childbirth, so she and other nurses rode on horseback up in the mountains to deliver babies. Her work dramatically reduced mortality rates because she was providing good midwifery care."

By definition, midwifery is the healthcare profession that deals with pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period (including newborn care), in addition to the sexual and reproductive health of women throughout their lives. Although midwifery was an acknowledged profession as far back as ancient Egypt, it is still often misunderstood today.

"Some people don't realize exactly what all a midwife can do," Estep said. "They often don't realize that we are highly trained. Midwives must have a master's degree and most have experience serving as labor and delivery nurses."

Before becoming degreed Certified Nurse Midwives and joining The Women's Clinic, all three providers became Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (the APRN designation in their titles) and participated in childbirth as nurses. Working alongside obstetricians gave them the confidence and incentive to become even more involved in the birth process.

"I love the process of pregnancy, labor, and delivery," Sloan said. "I was a labor and delivery nurse for six and a half years before graduating with my CNM degree in 2019. I want to be a part of that special time in a woman's life."

The circle theme surfaces once again with Windsor's career. She started as a midwife for Dr. John Siegle, an Ada-based obstetrician. After more than a thousand deliveries with him, she went to work as a midwife for the Chickasaw Nation. Like Windsor, Siegle is now with The Women's Clinic and the two providers have been reunited.

"I'm back with Dr. Siegle and he's an awesome doctor," Windsor said. "Obstetricians are very important. I am thankful I work with them because a birth doesn't always go the way you want it to go. It's nice to know you have someone there if you run into a complication."

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Like Windsor, Estep has worked for the Chickasaw Nation. She served as a labor and delivery nurse. After earning CNM status, Estep worked as a midwife for the Choctaw Nation in Talihina where mothers would sometimes drive hours for care. Also like Windsor, Estep's path as a midwife would eventually come full circle.

"I loved my time in Talihina and I learned so much," Estep said. "But Ada is my home. I want to take care of people that I know and put back into this community, like Dr. Siegle has done. It is really sad, and a disservice to women in general, that they have to travel hours to get the choices they should have anywhere. I'm really grateful to be working here, especially to our CEO Brenda Ware, because she has a passion and vision for moms and babies. I want to help promote that."

All of The Women's Clinic midwives are mothers. Among them they have raised 13 children, so there is no shortage of first-hand experience on the patient side of the birth process.

"I loved giving birth and I love being a mother," Windsor said. "And I think it's good to have experienced what you're teaching versus never having had a baby, although I know good providers who have never had a baby. I think it is an advantage when you do know what pregnancy is like, and what labor is like. Being a mom, I think that's important."

As mothers, the midwives have a deeper understanding of the entirety of childbirth and that informs their more holistic approach. It also emphasizes a more personal touch.

"You are able to develop an intimate relationship with your patients," Estep said. "We care for the whole person, not just the physical parts. We are looking at the emotional and mental aspects as well, and the family as a whole unit. The women we're taking care of, it's not just them."

Windsor recalled her obstetrician going out of the way to facilitate water births for two of her own children, because that was something she desired as an expectant mother.

"To me, the best care you can give somebody is something that's developed in collaboration with the patient," Windsor said. "She does all the work. I'm like the guardian angel that steps in if something goes wrong. It's patient-centered care and that's important to me."

As a subsidiary, The Women's Clinic is subject to the same rules and regulations that apply to The Clinic, a federally qualified health center. It also maintains the same mission of providing care to all patients, regardless of their abilities to pay.

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This has allowed the three midwives to lovingly recreate the pleasant experiences of their own childbirths with their current patients, without the added layer of financial anxiety that may occur in a corporate healthcare setting.

“Everyone deserves quality health care that is conveniently located,” Sloan said. “There is no reason it should be difficult for them to receive the care they seek. I love it here at The Women’s Clinic. I’m glad to be a part of something so special.”

Administration’s support of midwifery increases the success rate and strengthens both patient and provider satisfaction.

“The origin of the word midwife literally means ‘with woman’ and that’s the whole idea here,” said Brenda Ware, CEO of The Women’s Clinic. “Our midwives are there with their mothers all through the birth process. We are blessed to have such a compassionate and experienced team of midwives available to offer this type of care to any of our patients who desire it.”

Ultimately, The Women’s Clinic midwives are simply striving to bring their patients – and the lifecycle itself – full circle in the safest and most comfortable way possible.

“Midwives view childbirth as a normal physiological process,” Estep said. “It’s a normal event in people’s lives. It’s not a sickness, it’s not a disease. It’s about what the mother wants. If that’s a highly medical birth in the hospital with an epidural, then she should have that choice. Or if she wants to go natural, she should have that choice as well. We’re here to guide the process for them based on their choices.”

The Clinic @ Central Oklahoma Family Medical Center, or “The Clinic,” is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) meeting a stringent set of requirements, including care services on a sliding-fee scale based on federal poverty guidelines. Governed by a board of directors, including patient directors, The Clinic remains thoroughly invested in the needs of patients and its service areas. The Clinic currently operates in three Oklahoma communities – Konawa, Ada and Stratford. To learn more about The Clinic, The Women’s Clinic and The Kids Clinic, please visit www.cofmc.com.