

HEADLINE: 10% of births in Rijeka Maternity Ward are now done in an alternative way. Mothers from all over Croatia are coming to Rijeka to birth on the birthing stool or in the birthing tub.

RIJEKA - The appearance of the recently renovated maternity ward in The Clinic for Gynecology and Maternal Health in Rijeka (renovation started in August 2005, and doors were opened to the public in March 2006) validates the status of *Children-Friendly Hospital* this ward obtained back in 1995.

The choice of a light colour palette for the birthing rooms creates a sense of peace and calm, quite a contrast compared to other maternity wards in Croatia. The large room is separated into seven cubicles, one of which has a birthing tub. Along with the birthing stool, the birthing tub is one of two very popular choices of alternative birthing practices, and a reason why many expectant mothers from all over the country come to Rijeka to give birth.

“The specialty of our maternity ward is in a holistic approach to the birthing mother, who is not looked upon as an “object” in labour but rather the subject and an active participant in her own process. Although many obstetricians still assume that a woman in labour is not in a position to make decisions on her own, I believe that we have successfully established a balance between the medical profession that has to be drawn in when a mother and child’s health are involved, and, on the other hand, the birthing mother and her right to participate in decisions about her own body. Maintaining this balance is extremely important in order to both establish a relationship between the hospital team and the labouring mother and to be able to offer something beyond the standard obstetric procedure. The standard obstetric procedure, regardless of how impeccable it might be, will not bring fulfillment to a new mother,” explains Prof. Dr. Herman Haller, director of The Clinic for Gynecology and Maternal Health in Rijeka.

The overall satisfaction with the hospital staff and birthing practices in Rijeka Maternal Clinic is also noticeable on the faces of joyful mothers we visited in the hospital. Nikoleta Vale is one of the new mothers who opted for an alternative birthing procedure after her first, so-called “classical” type of birth. Non-conventional birthing protocols have been available in Rijeka since 2003, since which time there have been 305 births in water, including little Lana Vale.

“My first labour was “classical”, and maybe a bit easier than the second one in the tub because the second water labour was completely natural. However, unlike my first experience of childbirth, I feel physically marvelous because there was no surgical procedure of any kind,” says Nikoleta.

Nikoleta relocated to Rijeka from Zagreb (the capital of Croatia). Comparing Zagreb and Rijeka maternal wards, Nikoleta commented: “The advantage of Rijeka Maternal Clinic is primarily its hospital staff, especially its midwives. Besides, in Zagreb babies are separated from mothers after birth, which is not the case in Rijeka.”

One more new mother who decided to take an alternative option is Sonja Berta Prendivoj, who had planned to have her first child in Zagreb (Petrova Street) where she was assigned throughout her pregnancy. Unexpectedly she gave birth to her firstborn daughter Simona while visiting family in Rijeka. She was also one of the mothers decided to birth on the birthing stool.

The birthing stool is another extremely popular tool in Rijeka Maternal Clinic, and it has been exclusively used in more than 150 births since its introduction in 2005.

In this type of labour two midwives are permanently assigned to the labouring mother. The popularity and efficacy of the birthing stool is due to the way it uses the force of gravity to significantly and naturally decrease labour pains. Once it has been experienced, the birthing stool usually permanently replaces the traditional birthing bed, as mothers do not want to return to their beds. Many positive testimonies as well as returns to Rijeka Maternal Clinic for subsequent births are recorded simply because of the availability of the birthing stool.

“I decided to use the birthing stool because of the apparent low rate of episiotomy when the birthing stool is used. My active labour was about 45 minutes. Prior to using the stool in my active phase, I was mostly on the exercise ball, which also helped to manage my labour pains,” contributed Sonja, whose husband was also present in the birthing room.

The presence of partners at birth is also a helpful tool, as many mothers would confirm. In Rijeka it has been a common practice, although it is the only feature that bears an additional charge of 300 Kunas (\$60.00 CAD), unlike the tub or stool. Often, partners participate in childbirth classes that were formerly free and at the moment cost about 100 Kunas (app \$20 CAD) per couple.

Last year in Rijeka Maternal Clinic there were 2872 births, and in 2006 (up until June 19th) there have been 1171, or 12 births more than over the same period last year. This year 10% of births were *non-conventional*: 83 on the birthing stool and 30 in water. Non-traditional practices attract not only expectant mothers but also professionals from other Croatian maternity wards, who are also including their findings about non-conventional practices in research and study projects.

“Our Maternal Clinic functions very well at the moment, and the number of Cesareans is very low compared with the average rate of Cesareans in Croatia. It is primarily because of the availability of alternative options in birthing, our hospital staff and also our overall approach to birthing practices. Children with low birth weight, including premature births, are represented in less than 5% of births which is also relatively low compared to the average European rate. At this moment our infant mortality is also the lowest in Croatia, and it gives us great gratification in our field,” emphasized Dr. Haller at the end of the interview.

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