

Birth centres in hospitals an option

THERE are other options for pregnant women in Northern Tasmania.

Most accept that babies are born in hospitals and if they aren't, assume the parents are natural childbirth fanatics who risk the health of their baby with non-conformist attitudes.

The recent death of a baby in NSW who was delivered at home by a midwife will make people even more sceptical about anything other than standard birth practices.



Three options exist for pregnant women: hospitals, birth centres or home births.

In the North, the Queen Victoria Hospital is the major centre; the North-West has two obstetric units — Mersey maternity at Devonport and the Burnie division of the North-West General Hospital.

A birth centre is a home-like environment where a woman who is judged as a low-risk patient has a choice of doctor and midwife and has greater control over conditions, such as the use of drugs and the presence of relatives. Many women choose birth centres because it frees them from the restrictions of hospital routines, making birth a more personal event.

The only two birth centres in the State are in Launceston and Devonport; Launceston leads Australia in having an independent centre, a self-contained unit at the Queen Victoria Hospital. Devonport's birth centre is a room in the maternity hospital.

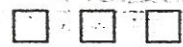
There are differences in the way

the two operate. In Launceston, women must contract their own private midwife but the Devonport unit allows hospital and private midwives.

If complications develop and the woman must be transferred to the hospital labor ward, in Launceston a midwife may not stay with her client as only one support person is allowed; in Devonport the midwife may stay with her client.

The lack of information and the costs involved make using the birthing centres difficult. Doctors are the only source of information about choices available but many give information about the birthing centres only if asked.

Because private midwives fees are not refunded by the medical benefits, some women find it difficult to justify it to their husbands.



The Launceston Birth Centre cannot afford to employ a permanent person, and so often there is no-one there to take bookings or give information. One Launceston midwife, Sister Cecily Harmey, has suggested that the city should have a health advisory service.

According to Julie Roach, there has been a resurgence of women wanting home births in the last year. She said that this is a very real option for women who want to accept more responsibility for the birth and who want their family to be present.

In Tasmania it is illegal for a registered midwife to attend a birth if a doctor is not present.

Women want continuity of care — to know who will look after them all through pregnancy