

Economics of obstetrics now a matter of location

United Press International
Urban flight and low birth rates have forced many inner-city hospitals to close obstetrics wards, but a "mini baby boom" is sparking a comeback in the business of births in suburbia.

Hospital planners and administrators say delivering babies has never been a big revenue producer for their institutions. High-tech diagnostic services and surgery are the real money makers. But in the last few years, obstetrics has turned from a loser to a profitmaker for some hospitals.

Location, they say, appears to be the key.

Middle-class flight from inner cities apparently has caused a radical shift in the birth business to suburban areas, where couples of child-bearing age and financial resources have relocated.

"It has been a trend in most major cities," said Robert

Wright, vice president of planning for Mercy Health Center, a non-profit hospital which moved from the inner city to the suburbs in 1975.

"We built out where the population was projected to come," he said. "Now we're reaping the benefits."

While the birth rate at Mercy has been soaring for the past three years, plummeting obstetrics business at St. Anthony Hospital, a non-profit hospital in the inner city, has caused administrators to eliminate the entire obstetrics ward.

"The number of births has been declining every year for the last seven years," said St. Anthony administrator J. Michael Stephens, who came to Oklahoma City from a St. Louis inner-city hospital also forced to close its obstetrics ward.

Because of all the support facilities that have to be maintained to operate obstetrics

wards, a sharp drop in the birth rate can be a heavy financial blow, Stephens said.

"Below a certain point, you don't come close to covering the cost," he said.

The slowed economy also has forced more couples to rely on state hospitals for birth services, said Dr. John Fishburne, chairman of obstetrics and gynecology at state-funded Oklahoma Memorial Hospital.

He said more than 4,000 babies a year are being delivered in facilities built to handle 2,500 as the recession has made it impossible for many couples to afford a private obstetrician.

Jerry Evans, director of planning for Baptist Medical Center, a non-profit, privately owned facility on the city's growing northwest side, said most hospitals constructed during the 1950s and early 1960s included obstetrics wards designed for birth volumes of the post-World War II baby boom. When births declined in the 1970s, those hospitals which could keep an adequate volume did okay, those which could not suffered substantial losses, he said.

However, the original "baby

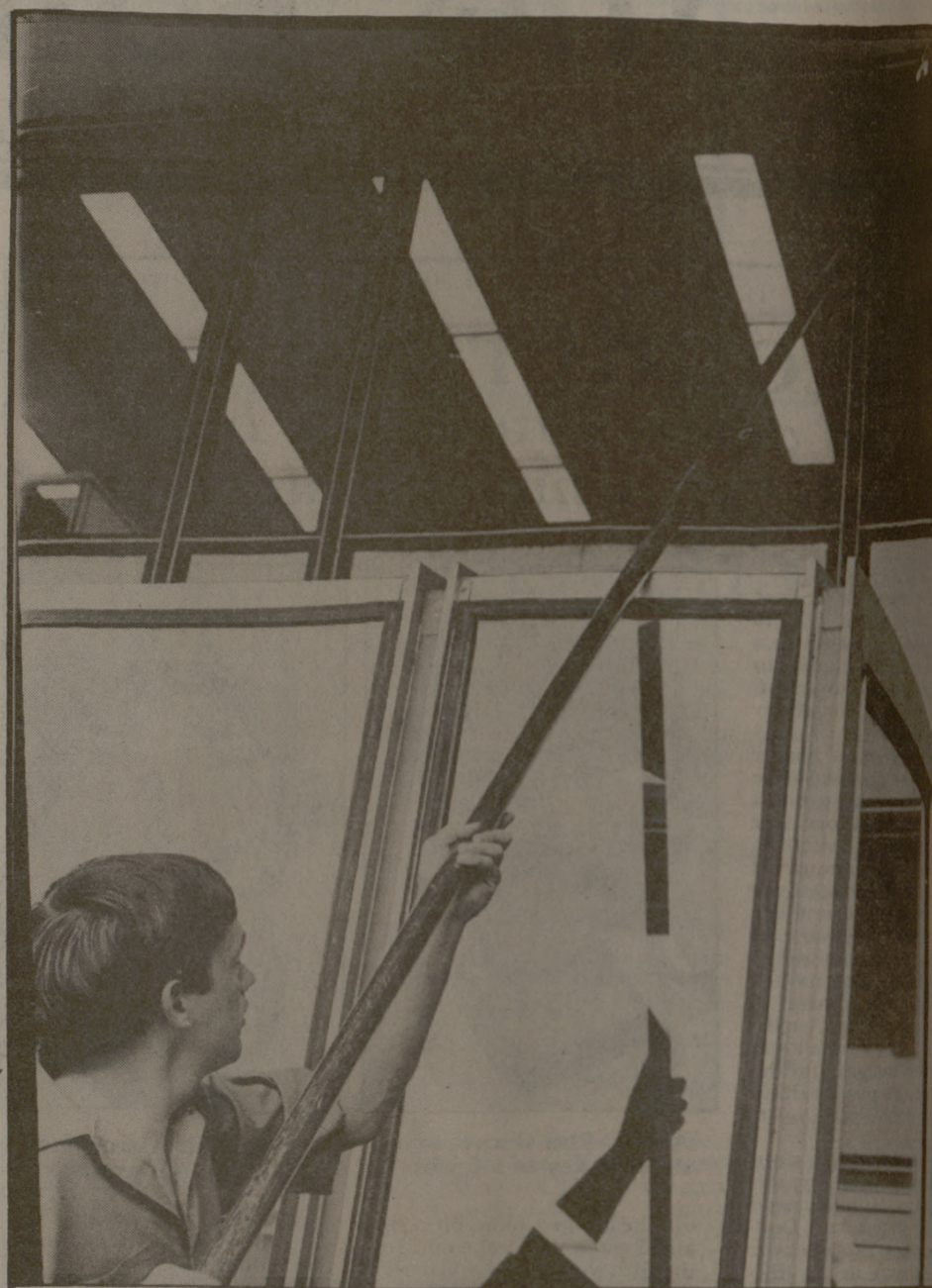
boom" kids who put off having children through their early 20s now are having children of their own, helping the birth business make a comeback.

"There is a mini baby boom in about its third year now," Evans said. "We're catching up with the births that were delayed through the 1970s."

The baby business is "competitive" and more "price responsive," making it unique among most hospital services, Evans said. "You're talking about young people who will typically shop around a bit."

He has joined other hospitals in providing facilities for the growing number of couples who prefer natural childbirth, which costs one-third to one-fourth of the \$2,000 to \$4,000 a traditional birth can run. Brandy Mills, vice president of financial affairs for the Oklahoma Hospital Association, said while obstetrics and emergency rooms traditionally are "notorious losers," as long as birth rate is climbing, the baby business can be more of a profitable venture.

"It's really a volume business," he said.



Cobweb cleaning

Jim Dillinger, a senior mechanical engineering major from DeKalb, cleans cobwebs in the hard-to-reach corners of the Sterling C. Evans

Library. Many of the building campus receive special attention during the slower summer season when the crowds are reduced.

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Hitchhiking risks hidden

United Press International
Hitchhiking's appeal to economy-minded teenagers and young adults is far outweighed by the hidden dangers, says Edward B. Patroski, director of investigations for Pinkerton's, Inc., a private security and investigations firm.

A recent California study

shows hitchhikers are very often the victims of highway crimes and are actually three times more likely to be the victim than the perpetrator.

At the same time, teenage and young adult drivers who have a natural tendency to give a ride to hitchhikers in their same

age group are also at risk, Patroski says.

He says parents should educate their children it is virtually impossible to differentiate a harmless and dangerous driver or hitchhiker no matter how well dressed or neat-appearing they are.

Some major dangers include:

- Injury and/or even death from a moving vehicle or side accident.
- Robbery, assault, rape, or other criminal acts.
- Arrest for indirect involvement in the transport of illegal drugs.
- Threat of blackmail or accusation of a crime by a hitchhiker.
- Apprehension and arrest for illegal hitchhiking or giving a ride on state or federal highways.
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