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by **Audrey Dutton**
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This new hospital is built to keep preemie babies with their moms

Whitney Pecha was 17 weeks along with twin girls when doctors gave her the news: One of the twins had a Powerball ticket's chance of surviving. Almost four months later, Whitney and Forrest Pecha had two daughters — Bodhi, who needed a little extra help to grow, and Magnolia, who flatlined three times the day she was born.

Both girls survived with help from doctors and nurses at St. Luke's Downtown Boise, and they're now healthy toddlers. But they started their lives in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU. For the Pechas, that meant having to be separated from their daughters for weeks.

"Going back and forth to the hospital was extremely hard, and you're not afforded the luxury of staying home and staying in your PJs and bonding," Whitney Pecha said.

The new St. Luke's Nampa hospital that opens Oct. 30 will feature in-room NICUs — believed to be the first ones in Idaho, and possibly the Northwest. The rooms are a way to keep families together when a baby needs NICU care. The \$114 million hospital includes two approaches to NICUs: a couple of smaller suites where families can stay with the babies, and seven large suites equipped to deliver the baby, get the baby on intensive care and allow the mother to recover, all in one place.

Better for mom, better for baby

Research shows that mothers and babies fare better when they aren't separated after childbirth, say St. Luke's officials. And parents who have had babies in the NICU — traditionally, a room full of babies in incubators, with specialists closely tending to them — say the physical distance can be hard to bear.

"We felt OK because they were in good hands, but it was heartbreaking every night because we knew we weren't there," said Forrest Pecha. "The in-room suite would've made life a lot different and probably a lot easier. ... To have a home away from home would've made it so much more comfortable."

And a larger share of babies are ending up in the NICU, even some who aren't born prematurely. Researchers from Dartmouth University found that, in 2012, nearly half of NICU admissions were for normal-birth-weight infants or those born at nearly full term or later, after years of shifting in that direction.

So there will be plenty of demand for the new rooms.

The administrator of the Nampa hospital, Ed Castledine, had his own experience with NICU care. His wife gave birth 16 years ago to twins who were a few weeks premature. One of them had trouble breathing and had to go to the NICU for a short stay.

That “unfortunately meant we were separated by six floors,” he said. “That was the hardest part.”

The new suites still have limits. They are meant for babies who are up to five weeks premature, so Magnolia or Bodhi Pecha likely would not have qualified, while Castledine’s baby son would have.

‘Environment of trust and safety’

The suites have two computer stations — one for mother, one for baby — and an incubator and crib for the baby. There is a sofa, a bathtub, a private bathroom with a shower and a breast-milk refrigerator in each suite.

While new here, the concept has been around in the U.S. for decades as “single family room” NICU care, according to the Advisory Board health care research and consulting group. An Indiana hospital opened a unit in May that can provide that kind of family-centric NICU care for even critically ill babies, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The Advisory Board says the rooms allow medical staff to tailor the environment to each infant’s needs, with lower noise levels and lighting. They also encourage breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact, and they are associated with fewer infections and better outcomes, the group said.

“It helps create that environment of trust and safety,” said Chanette Fretwell, director of women’s services for the new Nampa hospital.

But some hospitals have “expressed concern” that they’re more expensive to build and require more staff and more supply use, the Advisory Board said.

St. Luke’s Nampa spokeswoman Amy Stahl said the hospital has not broken down the costs associated with including the larger suites in the new building. However, retrofitting other St. Luke’s hospitals with in-room NICUs would be too cost-prohibitive, according to the health system.

High need in Canyon County

When the health system decided to build a new hospital in Nampa, it knew that Canyon County in particular could benefit from the in-room NICUs.

“Patients on this side of [the Treasure Valley] have higher risk factors,” Fretwell said. Canyon County mothers tend to have higher rates of diabetes, obesity and poverty.

Whitney and Forrest Pecha said they felt “incredibly blessed” to have their daughters cared for by the staff who kept Magnolia alive and Bodhi healthy. To have an opportunity to be a few steps away from their babies would have made it even better, they said.

“These rooms are a remarkable gift to families, to allow them to be as much like a family in such bizarre circumstances,” Whitney Pecha said.

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