

“Local Maternity Hospital Redefines Excellence”

by Mallory Betz

A light mist falls from the blanket of gray clouds that covers Santa Julia as I descend the hill to San Rafael. The usual chaos of La Calle de Ignacio Allende is nonexistent on this dark Monday afternoon. All is quiet.

I enter the Hospital de CASA and find Nancy, my favorite professional midwife, hurriedly gulping down a bowl of soup. “I have a woman in labor,” she tells me with her mischievous smile. I smile too because I know that this afternoon I will witness a miracle.

Several hours pass. I sit restlessly in the Hospital’s cafeteria, waiting to be called into the birthing room. Eventually I begin pacing the quiet halls. In the operating room, three doctors perform a caesarian and before long I see a nurse exit the room with a beautiful baby boy wrapped in a blanket in her arms. “Todo bien?” I ask the gynecologist as he passes. “Si, todo bien,” he tells me with a confident smile.

Finally, Nancy calls me into the birth she is attending. A young woman of twenty is about to deliver her first baby. I step into the corner and take in the scent of sweat and tears that saturates the room. The Mother is pushing with every ounce of strength left in her tired body. Her friend clasps her hand and mutters words of encouragement. As the baby’s head appears, her pain increases and I silently cheer her on, knowing that soon it will all be over and she will forget the excruciating labor the moment Nancy puts her baby into her arms. In what seems like an instant, the baby’s whole body is there on the bed, a perfect little girl gasping for her first breaths.

She is premature but healthy, and Nancy quickly wraps her tightly in a blanket and places her into her Mother's embrace. My throat tightens and I cannot help but let the tears flow silently down my cheeks.

The Mother cries too, but without reservation. "Gracias a dios!" she screams skyward. "Mi bebe, mi bebe, gracias a dios!" I observe the happiest moment of her life with astonishment and admiration. Nancy smiles at me with the ease and grace of a woman who has just helped another woman through her most important trial.

A midwifery student gently lifts the baby from the Mother's arms and dresses her in booties, a jumper, and a pink cotton hat, before returning her to her Mother to take her first sips of milk. Before I silently slip out of the room, I thank Nancy for allowing me to be part of the experience. Outside in the hall, I pack up my things and return to the damp streets of San Miguel and walk home in a mystified daze, quietly contemplating the profundity of the scene I have witnessed.

This Mother is just one of the thousands of women who have given birth at Hospital de CASA since its inception in 1994. In 2007 alone, 345 women had their babies at CASA. Staffed with a team of professional midwives, doctors, pediatricians, a dentist, a podiatrist, a chiropractor, and a full service laboratory, El Hospital de CASA is an integrated family health clinic and hospital that provides high quality services to the community for exceptionally low prices.

A Mexican woman from a rural community outside of San Miguel gave birth at the hospital a few weeks ago. She wrote on her patient survey, "I'm grateful in a thousand ways for the attention that they gave us. In very few hospitals do you encounter that kind of treatment." She is not alone in her sentiment. In 2008 to date, 100% of

women who gave birth in CASA stated in their patient questionnaires that their experience was either excellent or very good and that their healthcare provider treated them nicely and respectfully. The hospital's goal is to nurture genuine relationships with its patients and to provide access to medical services to people who could not otherwise afford healthcare. "There is something special about a woman attending to another woman," said Grisel, one of the hospital's professional midwives, "A unique chemistry and trust develops in the relationship."

El Hospital de CASA operates on a sliding fee scale to ensure that money is not a barrier to treatment. The idea is that healthcare is not a privilege, but a basic human right. Regardless of their financial situation, patients in need get quality medical care that is affordable to them. In 2007 alone, 13,532 outpatient consultations were given by the Physician and midwife team at the CASA Clinic.

The hospital's midwives are trained at CASA's internationally recognized professional midwifery school; the only accredited program of its kind in Mexico. A recent study performed by the University of California at San Francisco showed that on average CASA's midwives scored twice as high as medical school graduates from the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) on a comprehensive women's health exam.

The competency of the midwives is reflected in CASA's extremely low rates of caesarian births and babies with low birth weight. In 2007, CASA's low birth weight rate was 4.6% compared to Mexico's national rate of 10.9%. CASA'S caesarian rate was 13% compared to the state of Guanajuato's average rate of 35%. Although the hospital

is focused on maternity services provided by the midwives and doctors, the integration of laboratory services also plays an important role in the health of CASA's patients.

The lab technician, Yolanda, has worked at CASA for 17 years, "We've always provided good services at a low cost, but I think we also treat our patients with care and respect," she explains. The lab offers prenatal analyses, prenatal tests, free HIV testing, medical certificates that are required for students, restaurant workers, and other service workers, as well as tests for specific diseases requested by the doctor or midwives. According to Yolanda, these services are important "above all because of the low prices and the accessibility," noting that for many who live in the surrounding communities – especially single mothers and full time workers – getting to the general hospital can be very difficult. For some people this means they don't get the services they need.

Above all, the hospital strives to ensure quality care. The entire staff meets every two weeks to discuss complicated cases and how similar problems can be prevented in the future. Midwives, doctors, and administrators work as a team to constantly improve the quality of the hospital. If a midwife faces a complicated birth, a team of doctors is constantly on call in case of emergencies.

Tomorrow I will spend another day in the clinic, observing and assisting a professional midwife with her prenatal and postnatal consultations. If I'm lucky, I will see another birth. Soon I will transition back to my life in the US as I prepare to start my Master's degree in Women's Health/Nurse Midwifery. But I will never forget my summer as an intern at CASA.