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About Women's and Children's Health – Creating a Centre of Excellence

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Creating a Centre of Excellence for Women's and Children's Health at the future health-care complex in St. Catharines is one of the elements of our overall vision to improve patient care across Niagara.

The proposed Centre would expand the focus to women's care across all ages and would provide surgical and inpatient care to infants, children and youth up to age 18. A 24-bed paediatric unit would include three beds for continuous monitoring of a critically-ill child. For the first time in Niagara, four beds will be assigned for children and youth with mental health issues. Outpatient services will include day surgery, medical day care and outpatient clinics.

Having this critical patient mass in one location will allow us to offer excellent physician training programs for tomorrow's obstetricians, gynecologists and pediatricians. This opportunity is vital to recruit future specialists, particularly when the average age of our specialists now is 57.

Currently, our Maternal Child Program offers full obstetrical care to women of child-bearing age and inpatient/ outpatient care to children from birth to age 18 at Greater Niagara General Site, St. Catharines General Site and Welland Hospital Site.

Extensive research studies show that the lower the number of deliveries in a single obstetrical unit, the higher the risk for both mother and baby. A 10-year research study in Germany and Norway concludes that the chance of neonatal death increases if the number of low-risk deliveries is below 2,000 per year in a single delivery unit.

Population projections show that by 2011 the Niagara child/youth population will decline by 6.7% and the number of women of child-bearing age will decline by 2.1%. In Niagara, the number of hospital births last year was as follows:

- Greater Niagara General Site – 968
- St. Catharines General Site – 1,285
- Welland Hospital Site – 716
- Total births – 2,967

While the number of births at each site is below the threshold, the combined total is well over the threshold shown to reduce risk of mortality for newborns.

The NHS Maternal Child Program also underwent an external review by well-known clinical experts in 2004 with the following key recommendations:

- Planning in consultation with the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care should begin to identify a mechanism and appropriate site for a single centre of excellence for women's and infant's health on one site to serve the entire NHS.
- Consideration should be given to the inclusion of gynecology in the Maternal Child Program, converting this to a Women's and Children's Health Program.
- Consolidate all Level II (Special Care) Nurseries at one regional site with the recruitment of a Paediatrician with additional training and expertise in neonatology to ensure delivery of appropriate levels of care at that site.

The Canadian Nursing Association reports that last year, there were 9,447 nursing graduates in Canada, compared to the need for 12,000 graduates each year. Ensuring adequate nursing and physician coverage for each shift is becoming difficult, as our staff nears retirement age and recruitment becomes more challenging provincially, nationally and internationally. From a staffing perspective, centralizing the Maternal/Child program is the only possible way we can continue to provide quality and safe patient care.

Of course, quick access to care is essential for labouring mothers and mapping methodology shows that travel time for 90% of Niagara residents to the new health-care complex in St. Catharines will be 30 minutes or less – shorter than travel times to hospitals for many patients in the greater Toronto area and elsewhere in Ontario.

Emergency care for mothers, babies, children and youth will continue to be provided within all of the NHS's designated Emergency Departments and Prompt/Urgent Care Centres. Currently, 96 per cent of paediatric patients coming to our Emergency Departments are treated and released the same day.

Our vision is ambitious, but we feel that this is the health care Niagara deserves and needs. Over the next five years, we will be working with our partners to accomplish a better-care model. We welcome the public's feedback on the vision for change we've proposed. Go to www.niagarahealth.on.ca to learn more and fill in the 'Your Input' survey section.

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