

# Birth Should Be Family Event Says Health Educator

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By ELIZABETH TULLY

Parents must be more assertive if they want changes in hospital birthing procedures says a visiting maternal health educator, Diony Young.

However, she warned that they should approach hospital administrators with well-researched ideas rather than aggressive arguments.

After nearly 20 years as a parent and consumer advocate in the United States, the former New Zealand Health Department education officer is convinced of the power of the people.

In an interview at the home of Auckland relatives, Christchurch-born Diony Young spoke of the need for effective consumer pressure in maternity care.

"Changes need to be made in hospitals to make birth a family event," she said.

"The medical profession tends to treat pregnancy as a sickness, and labour and birth as highly complicated processes requiring medical and surgical intervention.

## Informality

"The management of labour and birth should be a combined effort worked out ahead of time by the parents and birth practitioner, according to the family's wishes."

The freelance medical writer and maternal health consultant, who is married to a university professor and lives in New York, believes that a range of birth options — both within and outside hospitals — should be available to families.

One option now open to low-risk families in the United States is free-standing birth centres.

These are run by certified nurse-midwives with hospital back-up and the

## Mainly Women

emphasis is on informality and family involvement.

Within the hospitals, Diony Young advocates a single-room maternity system which can be used by all child-bearing families.

## Attitudes

"The important aspect of this approach is that all women, irrespective of their risk status, can use one comfortably furnished room for labour, birth, recovery and post-partum care," she explained.

"This not only avoids unnecessary, and often dangerous, room transfers, but enables birth to be a family event."

She does not accept that many of the changes needed in maternity hospitals would be costly.

"The important thing is not the quality of the furniture or the colour of the paint on the walls but the attitudes and philosophy of the staff.

"They need to feel that birth is a family event and that the emotional, social and physical needs of the family must be given priority."

## Appreciated

Although the commitment must come from hospital staffs, the input must come from parents.

"Parents must be much more open and assertive

about what is important to them in birth.

"But they should not be asking for changes to hospital procedure and policy without doing their homework and being armed with evidence to support their requests."

From Diony Young's experience, informed consumer interest can be appreciated by hospital staff.

She received a sympathetic and responsive hearing from administrators of a New York hospital when she approached them 12 years ago after her son was born.

She said lobbying by American parents' groups on issues such as high caesarean rates, sibling attendance at birth, and the need for mother and baby to be together after deliv-

ery had contributed to policy changes in many hospitals.

"I believe that child-bearing families can work with the professionals to bring about changes in the system.

"Parents need to find out just what is going on in their maternity hospitals and start communicating with those in the hierarchy."



Diony Young... "need for input from parents."