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Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim explores how Northern Light Health is meeting challenges in providing maternal and infant care in rural communities.

Tim Dentry:

Welcome one and all to Tim Talk, part of our series of conversations with people who care about making our lives healthier, more informed, and more inspirational. This series connects with my Northern Light colleagues who are making a huge difference every day in providing quality and accessibility to services that do not have an abundance of resources at their disposal across our country. I'm so glad you're joining us today. Childbirth is such a transformative moment in the lives of new parents. Everyone has their own experiences and stories, most filled with joy and some filled with stress. I recall like it was yesterday when my daughters came into the world. We had plenty of choices and immediate access to care and the stressors of raising a young family was pure joy most of the time in hindsight. When I look at my daughters now who are mothers to four beautiful children, I am amazed at how they balance everything.

And then I think about those expectant families in our country and our communities where access might be a challenge and who may worry about their care when so many places are ending programs for obstetrics care. I am so happy to say that my guests today do such great things that they ease the worries of expectant families. Providing care to populations with decreasing birth rates is a difficult, yet important challenge for healthcare systems to address. Joining me to discuss how we're meeting that access issue is John Ronan, President of Northern Light Maine Coast and Blue Hill Hospitals and Senior Vice President of Northern Light Health. John is joined by Carrie Barnes, Nurse Manager of Obstetrics at Northern Light Maine Coast Hospital. Thank you both for being here.

Carrie Barnes:

Thank you.

John Ronan:

Thank you, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

Great. First starting with you, Carrie, and then to John, share with our listeners a bit about you personally and where your passion for OB care comes from.

Carrie Barnes:

Absolutely. Good morning. My name is Carrie, and as Tim so eloquently put it, I am the nurse manager of the OB unit at Northern Light Maine Coast, but I'm also a lifelong member of the Ellsworth community. I was born at Maine Coast Hospital and my children were born at Maine Coast Hospital and this is the community that raised me and it's my turn to give back, and that's part of the passion of the OB unit, the next generation, bringing them in. The generation that are having babies now are the people that went to school with my children. This is a community that has been so part of every aspect of my life that this is just an amazing way to give back to it in every way that I can.

Tim Dentry:

Fabulous. Thank you, Carrie. John, what are your thoughts?

John Ronan:

When I look at one of the comments that you just made Tim, about when you're pregnant, the last thing you want to have to worry about is am I going to make it to some place that I can safely deliver my baby? You touched on the point that many healthcare systems are closing OB units for a lot of good reasons. We looked at a number of years ago, we wanted moms to have that confidence in that there was a commitment to them, that we would be there for them when it was time to deliver their baby. So working with Carrie and others and you having the vision to put some money into a program that needed to be sustained and we'll talk in a few minutes about being a hub and what that means in our community, but really just wanting to make sure that expecting moms had a safe place to deliver care and take that worry away from them.

Tim Dentry:

Fabulous. Thank you both very, very much. So John, staying with you, can you give us an idea about just the geographics, the geographic region that Maine Coast Hospital covers? How that geographic draw has changed as the OB service landscape has changed in Maine? This is a multi-pronged question, I'll continue. And what some of the challenges are in providing maternal health services to the rural population in your region and what you're doing to address those challenges?

John Ronan:

Sure. Thanks Tim. I think the most obvious first answer to that question is the geographic area. You think about Hancock and Washington County. Maine Coast is surrounded by three critical access hospitals. A number of years ago, we decided that Maine Coast would become the hub of the services for that area. And with that came the responsibility of ensuring that we could deliver the services that we needed to for the community because we knew that these smaller hospitals were not going to be able to sustain some of the critical programs that they needed to have. And so when we looked at that, one of the other major challenges is staffing. Are there enough OB nurses? Are there enough docs to be able to deliver the care in the communities and be able to sustain four hospitals? And the answer to that was no. And so as we started looking at what do we need to do to keep our program going, we looked at working with our talent and recruitment people, and we've had to bring in some traveling nurses to keep that program going.

The geography, moms are going to travel a significant distance to deliver their baby. For them to be able to stop at Maine Coast and deliver that care was important to us. In order to get to the next hospital would be Bangor, which is fully capable of taking care of patients, but that drive is an extra 45 minutes for them to get there. And so we really looked at the long-term sustainability of the programs and we're seeing that now with the most recent announcement with MDI Hospital of closing their OB unit. That's

going to put a larger burden on Maine Coast, but also it's an honor for us to be able to say that we can take care of those patients and we'll take care of those patients for Hancock and Washington County.

Tim Dentry:

Carrie, what can a patient expect to experience during labor and delivery and recovery while receiving maternal health services? But especially along these lines, what do mothers appreciate most about giving birth at Maine Coast? What do you hear from our patients and families? And are there any stories that you could share with us?

Carrie Barnes:

Of course. I think what moms appreciate the most, not just moms, but all parts of that family are the relationships they build with the staff. Whether it's the midwife that they've seen throughout their pregnancy or that nurse that's brought them through the labor and delivery and then into that postpartum phase where they're maneuvering through all the emotions and the anxieties of being a new mother. The relationships are probably one of the key things that we hear most about and they come back and visit us afterwards. So the relationship often continues into those early years when the kids are here having pediatric care, they'll stop by just to visit the nurse that delivered them. So those are one of the greatest parts of working in that unit.

We also have so many options for moms there. The staff really work well with the mothers and the rest of the family and the midwives to give them the labor and delivery that they're hoping for. Working through that birth plan with them. If the birth plan has to pivot, how do we do that and helping them to reconcile that. We have pain options from medications through just hydrotherapy. We have a great tub that we use to help manage that labor, the pain that comes along with labor. There are so many wonderful things for those mothers to work with. The staff, the facility, the midwives, the providers, it's just a really supportive and well-thought-out process. And the education that goes into the staff, they can come in with confidence knowing that these are women that know how to take care of them and their babies and our expertise is in taking care of the entire family.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you.

John Ronan:

I was rounding on the department one night, Tim and one of our local hospitals in Machias had gone on diversion and an expectant mom came to Maine Coast to deliver her baby. And I was talking to her and I said, "How did things go?" And I'll never forget what she said to me. She said, "Wow, I had no idea that my experience would be so great at Maine Coast. Thank you for having this available to me." That's why we do what we do.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. So before we wrap up, any other closing thoughts? Any other things that either of you would like to share with our listeners?

John Ronan:

I guess I would just summarize by saying one of the questions I get asked a lot is, "In these times of financial challenge, why would you build a new OB unit? Nobody's doing that across the country, and

why was it the right thing to do for Maine Coast?" And my answer is always the same. I always look at this to say, if not us, then who? We know that the critical access hospitals that we talked about are challenged, we know that moms need a safe place to deliver care. And sometimes when you look at the challenges of health care, sometimes you have to just base yourself on what is our mission and why are we here? And when I think about delivering babies, it's never going to be a financial decision in my mind. It's always going to be a mission decision in my mind that we will deliver babies in Hancock County and Washington County at Maine Coast for our patients. That's why we did it.

Tim Dentry:

Great. Thank you, John. Carrie?

Carrie Barnes:

And I guess I want to share that I am so proud to be part of an organization that has that kind of forethought. And as a mother, it was a great place to have my babies and I could only dream of the unit that we have now as my daughters enter that phase of life for a third generation of my family to be born in our organization. So I guess my closing thought is thank you. Thank you to everybody who was part of it and for Northern Light for investing in that because it's an investment in our community and it's a great community. It's worth the investment. It's worth the investment.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, Carrie. Thank you, John. I want to personally thank both of you, not just for carving out time from your busy days for this podcast recording for our listeners, but also for what you do to really bring life into ... Literally bring life into the communities. But also bring life into our words that we are a caring organization that really wants to do everything we can for our staff and for those whose care we deliver. And to me, and the reason why I've been in hospitals for over 40 years now is because I believe they're sacred places in communities. And Ellsworth and Maine Coast is living proof, an example of that.

And it obviously begins ... The journey begins with what you provide for our community, and then it's up to the rest of us in the journey of people's lives to take care of them and their needs as time goes on. But you started off on the right foot and you started off on a positive service and caring service, so you make it real. So thank you. Thank you for that. And thank you for being our guests and sharing your experience. Thank you to our podcast listeners too. All 17 million of you, thank you very much. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring that starts with caring for one another. Thank you.

Announcer:

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