



*Happy moms gather for their last Centering Pregnancy group bearing the precious fruits of their labor.*  
*Photo courtesy of SRMHS*

## **Circling up for better health**

**By Randi Rourke Barreiro**

A woman steps off a scale, smiling.

This isn't a diet commercial. It's a scene from the Centering room at St. Regis Mohawk Health Services, where a group of mothers-to-be have gathered for their latest session of prenatal care. They compare growing bellies while taking their own blood pressure with digital cuffs.

The women chat and laugh as one of them visits privately with the doctor behind a folding screen. Suddenly, the distinct echo of a rapid heartbeat fills the room. The chatter stops for just a brief moment as the women acknowledge the tiny life that is making itself known via fetal doppler. Then the laughter picks up again.

This is the start of another Wednesday morning Centering group at the clinic.

"This Centering room is magical," says Debra Martin, health director. The lights are low, and it's quiet despite a busy hallway just outside the door. The room hosts a mind/body therapist on other days, which adds to the peaceful energy.

Centering is a model of culturally appropriate health care with three components: assessment, education, and support, offered in a group facilitated by a credentialed provider and co-facilitator. Participants spend more time with their provider and others with similar health concerns, giving them an opportunity to learn together and from each other.

According to the Boston-based Centering Healthcare Institute, there are three established areas of care: Centering Pregnancy, Centering Parenting and Centering Diabetes.

Centering Pregnancy was implemented in early 2010 under the guidance of Beverly Cook, Family Nurse Practitioner. She says pregnancy can be a powerful and transformative time but the typical prenatal care just didn't serve women's needs.

"What we were doing wasn't working," she said. "We needed to connect to the whole person, and provide a space where women could connect with each other during this critical time."

Patients, or "Moms," as they are referred to in Centering, participate in prenatal care in a welcoming environment with others whose due dates are close to their own.

"It helps to share your experiences with someone who really understands what you're going through," says Cook. "That support is essential to Centering and to our community."

The “Moms” seem to agree.

“It was fantastic,” remarked Niio Perkins, who delivered son Tristan in February. “I left every session better educated and feeling glad I went,” she said.

The “Moms” in her group still keep in touch, she added. “The bond is really there.”

The clinic’s obstetrician, Dr. Sonia Joseph, who has already helped deliver a Centering baby since coming aboard last month, agrees.

“It’s a great way for women to connect,” she said. “It makes pregnancy more natural than clinical. It is the best thing ever.”

Dr. Joseph noted that the women raise issues which wouldn’t normally come up in the typical doctor-patient prenatal visit, and that they are “pretty open” during group discussions.

She plans to attend training this summer in Centering facilitation.

St. Regis Mohawk Health Services marked its first year of Centering last winter. The tribe is the first of the 25 Indian Health Service facilities in the Nashville Area to integrate it into their tribal healthcare system.

“We proved that Mohawks can do it, and we did it first,” said Martin.

Sharon Rising, CEO of Centering Healthcare Institute, is thrilled by the progress.

“This site is sure to become a model and a resource for others in Indian Country,” she said. Although there are a few other tribal communities that have implemented Centering, the Mohawks are close to reaching an important milestone.

An upcoming visit by CHI will determine whether SRMHS will become an approved site, meaning the program has “met the standards for model fidelity, evaluation and sustainability.”

Martin and Cook are confident.

“If we want to be innovative, we must be open to possibilities,” says Martin. “Our experience with Centering has taught us that.”

“In terms of supporting women and the coming generations,” says Cook, “we are walking the walk.”

*Randi Rourke Barreiro is a member of the Centering Pregnancy steering committee at St. Regis Mohawk Health Services.*