



Bernadette Belej at home with her children Eva, 4, Isla, 1, and Liliya, 9.

private versus public hospitals ensued, nods of approval when I said Women's and Children's (WCH), then silence when I added, "In their home birth program."

My neighbours, sisters and close friends met this with aghast expressions and comments that ranged from "I'll just pretend you didn't tell me that," to "Stop! Don't tell me any more!" and finally: "Our daughter would have died if we'd done that."

Parents develop skills in managing potential risk to their children on a daily basis. Home births facilitated by the WCH are only permitted for women who meet their low-risk criteria. Even then, the Midwifery Group Practice program is in such high demand that I was not accepted during my two previous pregnancies.

My midwife advised me not to share our proposed location until after our child was born, but I resented the notion that I should hide my choice and when asked, I told. Are you picturing me with dreadlocks and hessian pants, dancing around my placenta under a starlit sky? Would that image change if I told you that one lady presumed I was having my baby at Burnside Hospital?

My husband and I educated ourselves, reading about the hospital's governing policy. Choosing home birth sidelines me in the one percentile. Recent figures in the *Medical Journal of Australia* show a higher rate of

normal vaginal births in publicly funded home births in Australia, with the combined rate of stillbirth and early neonatal mortality at 0.17 per cent, and zero maternal deaths.

The birth of my third girl was at home, with my husband and eldest daughter there to help. Her face radiated with joy when the baby was born. I laughed, cried, and laugh-cried as we sat together next to the mantelpiece in our green lounge room.

"I see my job as helping debunk the stigma, sharing what it means to carry a child, who we are as women and what we are capable of."

As the Midwifery Group Practice team celebrates 10 years since its inception and five years of offering planned home births, I remain extremely appreciative of the path they have forged in empowering women to birth in an environment that suits them.

I only hope that others develop an understanding of home births and the positive outcomes for the health of the mother and baby before slamming the gavel on what is a very personal choice. ●

## HOMETRUTHS

WORDS BERNADETTE BELEJ

When Bernadette Belej chose to have her third baby at home, she was unprepared for the barrage of criticism she faced from friends, family and strangers.

**P**regnant women come to know that their baby bump will be misinterpreted by others as an invitation to share their opinions, advice, and sometimes, better kept 'inner' thoughts.

By the time I hit 20 weeks' gestation with my third baby last year, I was used to women saying, "Wow! You're so big; that baby must be due any day now."

At 35, I was often asked if it was my first child. When I said no, my third, their mouths dropped in surprise. This was followed by the question about the gender of my other children. One lady who shared an elevator with me heard I was due to have a third girl. "What a shame," she said.

Cue final question: where are you having your baby? Assumptions about



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