

Samantha Searcy, RN BSN
Nurse-Midwifery, grad. 6/08
Integration at Fort Defiance Indian Hospital, Fort Defiance, Arizona

My GNS funding was to assist me in covering the cost of a two month internship on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. I had the incredible opportunity to be a midwifery intern at Fort Defiance Indian Hospital in northeastern Arizona.

It was incredible to leave Portland, where my clinical exposure was largely in urban, private practices, and go to this relatively remote Indian Health Service site. It was as close to socialized healthcare as can likely be experienced in this country. For the first time, I was able to provide healthcare on a need-oriented basis.

Labor and Delivery at Ft. Defiance has been run by midwives for more than 30 yrs. The doctors are available for surgery and consultation on medically complicated patients. But they primarily work in clinic, do ultrasounds and gynecological procedures. The midwives maintain a tremendous amount of independence and are happy to co-manage the infrequent women who require medical care during labor and delivery.

The vast majority of the births that I attended were strikingly normal. Women, children, and often young family members (cousins, sisters, brothers, etc.) were common support persons for these women. It was very unusual for a woman to be unaccompanied or alone with her husband/boyfriend. More likely, she came with female family members for support and all present were supportive and helpful in helping her cope with the discomforts of labor. Many women utilize iv pain medication, but the vast majority deliver without anesthesia (epidural rate of <7%). The cesarean rate is also lower there, at approximately 13% (compare this to the national average of >35%).

I feel honored to have had the opportunity to support these women and to attend their births. I gained a unique perspective on Navajo culture and the mechanics of normal, unmedicated and non-medical birth. It was a tremendous gift as a new midwife to witness a culture of birth that is so normal and unchanged by the healthcare system.