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Although the coronavirus pandemic slowed events, gatherings and retail opportunities, one local OBGYN said the baby business is booming.

Dr. Lucien-Max Tchuisse, who owns First Coast Obstetrics & Gynecology in Palatka, said while some patients haven't shown up because of coronavirus worries, many women still do.

"The number of patients has actually risen," Tchuisse said. "We haven't seen a decrease."

He said he expected this to happen because of the pandemic. An uptick in the number of pregnancies is common because people have been encouraged to remain isolated.

Tchuisse expects his winter to be "very, very busy" with deliveries because of coronavirus.

He said his practice is taking precautions during this time by encouraging patients to wear masks and social distance in the waiting room. Patients are screened for symptoms before they enter the facility, and during childbirth, only one family member is allowed in the room.

Putnam Community Medical Center shut down maternity services in March after hospital officials saw a decline in county births over a span of five years. CEO Mark Dooley said in November 850 babies were delivered annually at the hospital.

Tchuisse said he delivers babies in Ascension St. Vincent's Clay County now, and although he had loyal patients stay with him, he doesn't think the closure was beneficial. He said a rural county such as Putnam needs good community health.

"It has not been a good thing," Tchuisse said.

Alyn McGee, a certified nurse midwife at Tchuisse's practice, said most people drive to Ascension, which is an hour away, or go to Flagler Hospital in St. Augustine. The problem with the change is some people don't have a reliable way to get to the hospital.

"It's been devastating," McGee said. "It's been horrible."

She said since the practice reopened, patients have been brave enough to return, and this week alone, the office expects to see 10 new OBGYN patients.

McGee said the original stay-at-home order issued statewide in March took a toll on the practice because it's hard to do a pregnancy examination over the computer, as many medical practices began doing. One rule the office has is only the patient can enter the facility, meaning no family members are allowed in to see the latest sonogram or hear updates. McGee said the rule makes it difficult for families, but it is to ensure safety during the pandemic.

Three patients who were screened prior to entry were diagnosed with coronavirus because they were asymptomatic but exposed to COVID-19, McGee said.

Patients also struggle because until the Florida Department of Health in Putnam County began testing for free, not many patients could afford to be tested, she said.

“This has been hard on a lot of our patients financially. COVID has wiped them out,” McGee said. “It’s just bad and it’s not getting any better.”

She, too, couldn’t emphasize enough the benefits of wearing a facemask to prevent contracting the virus.

“Stay at home. Wear a mask,” McGee said. “Just please wear a mask. Something that simple.”

At his practice, 7000 Old Wolf Bay Road, Tchuisse said he treats his patients like all other women but said pregnant women should stay at home as often as possible during the virus because COVID-19 effects on the fetus are still unknown.

“We have to assume they could be negative effects,” Tchuisse said. “This is going to take some time to still understand.”

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