

Women are working later into their pregnancy
and returning to the office sooner after giving birth

Babies, bonding and back to work

By Leslie Goldman
Special to the Tribune

On Sept. 14, 2000, Merita Tan delivered a healthy baby boy. On Sept. 15, 2000, she delivered another one. The difference: On Wednesday, she was Dr. Merita Tan, working full time as an obstetrician/gynecologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. But on Thursday, she was patient Merita Tan, 37, taking time out to give birth to her own first child.

In doing so, she joined the swells of American women tackling the dual role of employed mother. But she did so in such a seamless manner that her maternity leave barely registered as a blip on her work history: Tan worked throughout her entire pregnancy, and was back to work just three weeks after her own delivery.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau report released last month, women are working later into their pregnancy and venturing back to the office sooner after birth—a trend believed to reflect the burgeoning percentage of women holding college degrees and managerial positions.

In the mid-'90s, 67 percent of expectant first-time mothers were working through their pregnancy and 54 percent of all mothers worked full-time. Those figures were up from 44 percent and 40 percent respectively, from the early '80s.

Further proof of shifting maternity habits: In a recent survey of 1,300 working mothers conducted by ParentSoup, one of the nation's largest parenting Web sites, two-thirds of respondents said they stayed away from work for 12 weeks or less after delivery. One out of three confirmed being gone for less than eight weeks.

That's generous compared with Highland Park hair stylist Lisa Reams, who worked so far into her pregnancy that she went into labor in the middle of a hair coloring. Eleven days after her trouble-free delivery, Reams was back at the salon. Her husband, who was recently laid-off, stays at their Waukegan home with their 3-month-old daughter and their toddler son.

Reams, 34, described her decision

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Tribune photo by Heather Stone
Tan, an obstetrician/gynecologist
at Northwestern Memorial
Hospital, consults with patient



Photo for the Tribune by Anthony Robert LaPenna
Merita Tan holds her son Evan, 1. Tan worked throughout her entire pregnancy and was back to work just three

BABIES: Maternity leave seems too long for some women

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to hasten back as financially motivated—a six-week sabbatical after her son's birth cost her a chunk of clientele—but also says the short-lived maternity leave was a pre-emptive move against cabin fever.

"I would have gone crazy at home," said Reams, whose doctor has yet to learn of her lightning-speed return to work.

Ellen Mauer also worked until her moment of maternal truth. The Diamond Lake Elementary School principal began having contractions on the job in February. Though she had initially earmarked between 6 and 12 weeks for maternity leave, Mauer found herself negotiating a manageable mountain of paperwork from home after just one week—voluntarily. Six weeks of telecommuting proved to be a satisfying transition between motherhood and work, after which Mauer was ready to return to the office full-time. She is fortunate to have a family member who can help take care of the child.

But if the Family Medical Leave Act guarantees 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid maternity leave, why are so many women forging time off, be it immediately before or after delivering—even if they're financially able?

"When the baby comes, there's often a flip-flop in their decision," explained registered nurse Linda Beth Tiedje, an adjunct associate professor in Michigan State University's department of epidemiology and a specialist in the area of working mothers. "Women who think they'll be very happy at home often find themselves unhappy, and after two weeks, 24-7, they feel guilty. They want contact at work and can't wait to get back."

Craving adult interaction

Tan can identify with the urge to return to work immediately. "People said, 'Oh, you never know. You'll want to spend time with him,'" she said. "That's true, but I was unusual. I've never been one to take time off or take vacations. I just wanted to get back to work—I missed it."

In a similar vein, Mauer was excited to reignite her flame at work, because "I didn't have a clear picture of what was going on in the world. I was craving adult interaction."

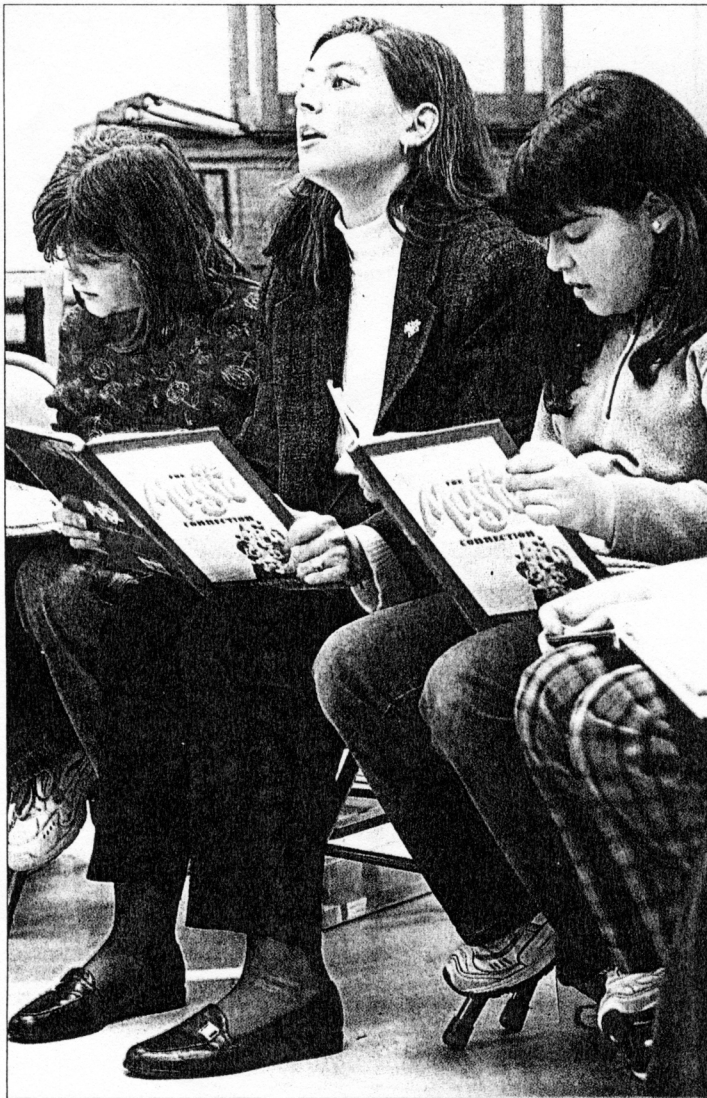
But for each new mother who boomerangs back to work (such information indicates that the likelihood that a woman will remain at the same job increases with employer-provided maternity leave or if the mother's income is a substantial portion of the family income), there are still plenty of working women who reinvent themselves as stay-at-home moms.

"Professional women are often blown away by feelings of [maternal] attachment and may not want to return to work," said Tiedje, who has been following a contingent of 200 first-time mothers since 1985.

Her research, which has focused on role conflict in working mothers, has taught her that working mothers prefer to carve out their niche with scalpel-like precision, instead of attacking the role with a butcher knife.

"In the '80s, there was the Wife-Parent-Worker conflict," Tiedje said. "The paradigm was, when you pursued three major roles like that, of course you'd have conflicts."

With the '90s, some parenting experts had a tendency to oversimplify these still-real con-



Elementary school principal Ellen Mauer, flanked by 4th graders Jacqueline Funk (left), and Vivianne Garcia, found she was ready to return to work six weeks after delivering her daughter.

flicts.

"The truth," Tiedje said, "lies somewhere between the role conflict of the '80s and the 'better-off' of the '90s. Real life is a mixture."

Today's self-help books are more prescriptive in nature, Tiedje said. But by spelling out steps for working-mom success, these books can tend toward condescension. "The women I've been following for 15 years have shown me there isn't one right way to do it."

Indeed, Tan admits that, while a brief leave was satisfying for her, she recommends her patients take off more time to bond with baby.

"At six weeks, babies become more interactive. They develop a social smile, they start to



Photo for the Tribune by Jeremy Fischer
Mauer, feeding Kate, 10 months, has curtailed 12-hour work days since her daughter's birth.

she has moderated her working hours so she can fit in private time with her baby.

Tan said she was able to sneak in such bonding time late at night, when her son would awaken for feedings and comfort. But she does admit her occupational background has left her well-equipped to handle multiple middle-of-the-night awakenings. "If you're used to getting six to eight hours of solid, uninterrupted sleep every night, it can be very traumatic to arise every two to three hours," she said.

Time passes slowly at end of pregnancy

More bonding time came with reduced work hours for the first three weeks post-delivery, and "I was back, full-force, at six weeks."

Regardless of decisions mothers make after delivery, Tan does advocate working throughout pregnancy for healthy women.

"Time tends to pass very slowly [at the end of pregnancy]. Every day you don't go into labor seems to last even longer. It's better to keep busy; you get less anxious."

She does not, however, recommend women work excessively long hours, particularly in their final month of pregnancy.

Parents Magazine senior editor Maura Christopher said progressive employers are making it easier for new mothers to rejoin the work force, with options like enhanced job flexibility, job sharing and on-site daycare.

At Hewitt Associates in Lincolnshire, for instance, private "mother's rooms" are available for women to pump their breast milk.

Ideally, exceptional perks such as these soon will constitute the norm, Tiedje said. "We can't let companies off the hook, and we can't lose track of [workplace support] for families."

But concerns that such female-friendly benefits will disappear in today's volatile economy and fearful climate do exist.

"Post-Sept. 11th, a lot of parents re-evaluated their priorities, and many of them are emphasizing family more," Christopher said. "Offsetting this, though, is the shaky economic climate. A lot of women who have jobs—especially if they contribute a significant portion to the family income—don't want to push their luck by leaving the work force altogether."

As the boundaries between parent and professional continue to blur, the ways in which women blend the two roles is coming into focus.

For Mauer, it means no more 12-hour school days or working weekends. For Carrie Landsman, a 28-year-old physical therapist in Oak Park and mother to 11-month-old Adam, it meant supplementing her maternity leave with several weeks of acquired time. She now works part-time, mostly evenings and weekends, and feels blessed to have the support of her husband and nearby parents.

"Work serves a function," Landsman said. "I enjoy utilizing my skills, and I enjoy the financial benefits. But it's nothing in comparison to being Mom."

'Women who think they'll be very happy at home often find themselves unhappy. ... They want contact at work and can't wait to get back.'

—Nurse Linda Beth Tiedje

'get' who you are," she said. "That's important bonding time."

Tan says that, although she's still working full time and is fortunate to have a great nanny,