

Hospital farewells 'guardian angel' of the delivery suite

JASON DOWLING

WHEN Sister Julie O'Brien started work as a midwife at the Mercy Private Hospital 35 years ago, childbirth was viewed as a sickness. Mothers were kept in bed for days, seeing their babies only at feeding time.

Fathers waved at their new children through a window. There was no chance that fathers could stay at the hospital, too.

"In the early days, the parents went home with a stranger — they had hardly touched the baby," Sister O'Brien said.

Sister O'Brien, 62, the last of the original 22 nuns who began working at the East Melbourne Mercy Hospital for Women when it opened in 1971, will leave the Mercy (now in Heidelberg) on January 6, to retire. She said the "normalisation of pregnancy and treating childbirth as wellness" had been the biggest change she had seen in 35 years.

She said that new parents were no longer treated as if they could do little for their baby.

A year at a hospital in Forbes, NSW, in 1978 changed Sister O'Brien's understanding of childbirth.

It was there that she helped a woman give birth, and was amazed to see her standing on the hospital lawn chatting, two hours later. In Melbourne, at the time, women were still being



Sister Julie O'Brien. PICTURE: JOE ARMAO

confined to bed for two days after giving birth.

Sister O'Brien's first job was in a bank, but coming from a family of strong Irish Catholic faith — one of her three brothers is a priest — she knew she would not find peace until she had experienced the convent.

She always thought she would be a teacher, but after 40 years as a sister, she has no regrets. Sister O'Brien said she had met wonderful people as a midwife and pastoral carer at the Mercy. "I really loved being a midwife," she said. "New life is amazing."

She said working in the delivery suites "never ceases to be awesome". While pastoral care, she said, was about helping mothers cope with traumatic circumstances. In the days before ultrasound, mothers who

suspected they had had a miscarriage had to go into hospital and wait for two or three days for the pregnancy test results. Other mothers experienced difficulties after giving birth.

Sister O'Brien told of a mother whose baby was born with severe medical problems. The mother wanted nothing to do with the baby. The father was devastated — he had dreamt of taking his new son fishing. Sister O'Brien went to the intensive care unit and held the baby boy.

She returned to the new mother and told her how beautiful her child was and how she had held him in her arms. The mother had the chance to hold her terminally ill child and say goodbye — the baby died a few days later.

Sister O'Brien said helping mothers through trauma had been rewarding. There was a huge need for pastoral care, she said, for single mothers, mothers who experienced trauma, and mothers who did not have family support networks.

On her desk sits a card from a recent new mother. "I am blessed that God sent my guardian angel to me during one of the most difficult times of my life," the card reads.

The Mercy Hospital for Women is about to say goodbye to one of its original guardian angels.