

## Hospitals gear up for expected boom of Year of the Horse babies

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HOSPITALS are gearing up for a Year of the Horse baby boom, given the belief that those born under this Chinese zodiac sign are energetic, intelligent and strong.

Raffles Hospital is preparing for a 10 per cent surge in the number of babies born there. Singapore General Hospital, which sees about 2,200 expectant mothers every year, expects a 3 per cent to 5 per cent jump.

Even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said on Wednesday how he was pinning his hopes on this year's shuang chun or "double spring", as Valentine's Day coincides with chap goh mei, the 15th day of Chinese New Year.

Chap goh mei marks the end of Chinese New Year, and some also consider it as the Chinese Valentine's Day, when women would hurl oranges into a river in the hope of landing a good husband.

Almost 300 couples have registered to marry on the popular day known for love and romance, "so we are off to a galloping start", PM Lee said.

He also noted how the dismal showing in the previous Year of the Snake, when around 40,000 babies were born, brought Singapore's total fertility rate to 1.19.

This was the lowest since 2010, when the Tiger reigned, and falls short of the 2.1 children that each woman needs to bear for the population to replace itself.

The Year of the Dragon remains the most popular for births here, with 52,957 babies born in 1988, the highest number since 1967.

But next on the 12-year Chinese zodiac cycle popularity stakes are animals such as the Rat and the Horse, when the number of babies born usually trumps that of the preceding year,

Though it narrowly lost in the last zodiac cycle, the Horse ushered in more babies than the Snake in the previous two rounds. For instance, there were 51,142 babies born in 1990 compared to 47,669 in 1989.

"Based on past trends, the Dragon year is followed by a dip in the Snake year that follows immediately after, before a rise in the Horse year," said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Yap Mui Teng.

Explaining the appeal of Horse babies, feng shui master Hui Jie of Hui Master International Geomancy said: "Apart from being associated with traits like intelligence and diligence, they tend to do well in careers and investments as they have a good sense of curiosity and are risk-takers."

Hospitals are getting ready to welcome more babies for the Year of the Horse, which runs from Jan 31 to Feb 18 next year.

Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital has started accepting bookings for its first maternity ward which will open in April.

This is because Mount Elizabeth Hospital is facing an overwhelming demand for single bed maternity rooms.

In its 35-year history, the highest number of babies born in Mount Elizabeth was in 1990, when there were 7,415 deliveries - a 25 per cent increase from the Snake year before.

"We are well prepared to manage any surge in delivery numbers," said Dr Kelvin Loh, chief executive at both these hospitals.

At Thomson Medical Centre, public areas such as customer service counters and toilets are being renovated in anticipation for the rise in delivery bookings.

Mr Terence Ng, 30, was one parent who got ahead of the crowd when he ushered in a baby girl on the first day of the Year of the Horse at Gleneagles Hospital.

"We planned the timing as my dad was also born in the Horse year," said the banker.

"A lot of Chinese idioms say good things about the horse and we are all very pleased that she made her grand entrance this year."

Demographer Gavin Jones from the National University of Singapore said that the tradition of having a baby in an auspicious year is still alive here, but not as widely adhered to as before.