

# **Doula Services**

## **What is a Doula?**

The word 'doula' comes from ancient Greek and is now used to refer to a woman who helps other women. It has been applied to childbirth to refer to 'a woman experienced in childbirth who provides continuous physical, emotional and informational support to the mother before, during and after childbirth'.

## **What is a Post-Partum Doula?**

A post partum Doula provides care to a family with a newborn baby.

## **What is a Birth Doula?**

A birth Doula recognizes birth as a key life experience that the mother will remember all her life. She understands the physiology of birth and the emotional needs of a woman in labor. The birth Doula assists the woman and her partner in preparing for and carrying out their plans for the birth. She stays by the side of the laboring woman throughout the entire labor, providing emotional support, physical comfort measures, an objective viewpoint, and assistance to the woman in getting the information she needs to make good birthing decisions. A Doula facilitates communication between the laboring woman, her partner, and clinical care providers.

## **Doulas as Members of the Maternity Care Team**

Each person involved in the care of the laboring woman contributes to her emotional well being. However, doctors, nurses and midwives are primarily responsible for the health and well being of the mother and the baby. Medical care providers must assess the condition of the mother and her baby, diagnose and treat complications as they arise, and focus on a safe delivery of the baby. These priorities rightly take precedence over the non-medical psychosocial needs of the laboring woman.

It is the doula's focus to help ensure that these needs are met while enhancing communication and understanding between the woman or couple and the staff. Many doctors, midwives and nurses appreciate the extra attention given to their patients and the greater satisfaction expressed by women who were assisted by a doula<sup>6</sup>.

## Doula Support via Research

In the late 1970's when Drs. John Kennel and Marshall Klaus investigated ways to enhance maternal-infant bonding they found, almost accidentally, that introducing a doula into the labor room not only improved the bond between mother and infant, but also seemed to decrease the incidence of complications<sup>3,4</sup>. Since their original studies, published in 1980 and 1986, numerous scientific trials have been conducted in many countries, comparing usual care with usual care plus a doula. Two recently published abstracts reported that when women had Doulas during labor, their 'mother-infant affectionate interaction scores' at a home visit two months later were significantly higher than for women who did not have a doula<sup>1,2</sup>. Another recent randomized controlled trial reported that the cesarean rates in induced labors were reduced from 64% to 20% if a doula was present<sup>5</sup>.

### References:

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## **Doula Services and Costs**

There are two basic types of Doula services: independent doula practices and hospital/agency doula programs. Independent Doulas are employed directly by the parents. They usually have telephone contact and at least one prenatal meeting with their clients to establish a relationship. When labor begins, the Doula arrives and stays with the woman until after the birth. A postpartum meeting to process the birth is usually included in the Doula's service. Most Doulas charge a flat fee for their services, and many base their fees on a sliding scale.

Some Doula programs are administered or associated with a hospital or community service agency. The Doulas may be volunteers or paid employees of the hospital or agency. These programs vary widely in their design. Other hospital/agency Doula programs make doula services available to the expectant mother or parents, who may meet and choose their Doula, or have one assigned to them, along with a backup doula. They may work with their Doula in much the same way that private Doulas and clients work together.

There is a growing third part reimbursement for labor support. Grant funding is often available, and some health agencies have contracts with doula organizations to support women in poverty and women with special needs. At present, however, most Doula care is paid for directly by the client.