

ICEA Position Paper

The Role and Scope of Birth Doula Practice

Position

The concept of labor companionship (birth doula) is well-documented from ancient art to present day evidence-based research.

Additionally, labor companionship provides the one-on-one emotional, educational and emotional support that has shown to make significant positive differences in labor and birth outcomes. The International Childbirth Education Association recognizes the vital role that birth doulas play as a member of the maternity health care team.

Introduction

A birth doula is someone who provides physical, emotional, and informational support to women during the birth process. The term 'doula' (pronounced DOOLah) is derived from a Greek term meaning female servant.

ICEA certified doulas are trained professionals who recognize birth as a key life experience. They support the physical and emotional needs of women in labor. They provide information that helps the woman make informed decisions in conjunction with her healthcare providers.

In addition, doulas offer guidance and community resource referrals to families regarding maternal self care, lactation, and other issues pertinent to healthy parenting through the first six weeks postpartum. A doula provides emotional, educational and physical support. In contrast to the doula's role, a labor and delivery nurse tends to the clinical needs of the laboring woman in a hospital or birth center. A nurse who studies further to become a Certified Nurse Midwife can deliver babies and prescribe medicine. A monitrice, who may or may not be a nurse or a midwife, has received training in clinical skills related to birth, such as checking fetal heart tones, maternal blood pressure and cervical change.

Benefits of Birth Doula Care

Statistical data from one of the largest study reviews (Hodnet, et al, 2012) demonstrates the following benefits of women who have labor support and women who do not. Women who do have labor support are:

- › 28% less likely to have a cesarean section;
- › 31% less likely to use synthetic oxytocin to speed up labor;
- › 9% less likely to use any pain medication; and
- › 34% less likely to rate their childbirth experience negatively.

Over twenty years of research and a multi-clinical trial study (Klaus, et al, 2002) show that doulas can have a

significant impact on the birth process. It is important to point out, however, that if a birthing facility has taken steps to reduce the cesarean section rate, then the first percentage value may not be precise.

- › 50% reduction in the cesarean rate
- › 25% shorter labor
- › 60% reduction in epidural requests
- › 40% reduction in oxytocin (pitocin) use
- › 30% reduction in analgesia use
- › 40% reduction in forceps delivery

Scope of Doula Practice

Prior to birth, a doula provides information to her clients about the birth process in general, a variety of comfort measures and coping skills, and common procedures.

The doula should offer evidence-based information in a manner as unbiased as possible. Referring the client to reliable sources so that she can make her own decisions imparts confidence that she can draw upon during labor.

As a doula accompanies a woman in labor, her primary responsibility is to be present in every sense. A doula provides continuous care. She should have arrangements to provide for her client's care in case she is unable to attend the birth.

A doula provides culturally appropriate emotional support to the laboring woman, helping her to cope with labor in her own way. The doula, as a servant, lays aside any preconceived ideas she may have and supports the mother in the way that the mother chooses to labor.

A doula also supports the father and others who are present, helping them to participate in the birth experience to the extent that they are comfortable.

A doula physically supports the mother in a variety of ways. She will suggest alternative (upright and gravity positive) positions for the mother, remind her to maintain her fluid intake, make sure she goes to the bathroom frequently, or offer the use of heat/cold therapy for stress and pain relief. A doula may help with coping skills

such as breathing techniques, relaxing touch or visualization. She may suggest dimming the lights or playing music – whatever creates a soothing environment for the mother.

There is a misconception that doulas only provide care for those interested in natural childbirth/unmedicated births. Doulas provide care for women with and without pain medication, unaccompanied teen mothers, women who have little or no social support, women who have disabilities, women who plan cesarean sections, women who have unplanned cesarean sections or women who are planning a TOLAC (trial of labor after cesarean) or VBAC (vaginal birth after cesarean). Since the core of the doula's belief is to make this the very best birth experience for a woman, the doula can be a benefit regardless of the particular circumstances surrounding a birth.

Limitations of Doula Practice

A doula does not give medical advice or perform any medical tasks. While it is beneficial for a doula to be knowledgeable about medical procedures, her job is not to make decisions for the client. She may describe a procedure, explain why it is done, clarify the procedure's risks and benefits, and explain any alternatives (Gentry, et al, 2010). In many cases, when clients have questions about medical issues, the doula can consider it an opportunity to facilitate communication between the client and her caregivers. When the woman and her family speak directly with her healthcare providers, it reduces risk of miscommunication and increases shared decision making.

Doulas do not contradict health care providers. The woman and her family have chosen a provider they presumably trust. Entering into an adversarial relationship with that provider undermines the woman's confidence in her provider and in her ability to make her own choices (ICEA, 2013). An adversarial relationship may also affect not only her credibility in the community, but that of her doula colleagues.

Doula Professional Responsibilities

It is a doula's responsibility to maintain professional relationships with others caring for the mother, such as her family, as well as with her healthcare providers.

A doula protects the privacy of her clients. Per HIPAA, no personal health information (PHI) should be shared unless the client has given her express consent.

Those participating in the ICEA Doula Program may attend a workshop either in person or online, complete the referenced reading list, and submit certification materials within one year of enrolling in the ICEA Program. An ICEA certified doula is required to continue her education, completing at least 24 contact hours during the four year recertification period, focused on doula care, childbirth education or the postpartum period.

Implications for Practice

Labor support/doula care is in demand world-wide (Stevens, et al, 2011). Doulas provide a bridge in the maternity care gap. Continuous labor support has been shown to have positive pregnancy outcome benefits, including improved satisfaction with the birth and a rise in self-esteem of the mother. This could positively impact the mother-baby relationship in the postpartum period as well as breastfeeding initiation and continuance (Gruber, et al, 2013; Hodnet, et al, 2012; Klaus, et al, 2002).

ICEA, therefore, believes that birth doula care should be available to every woman who needs or wants continuous labor support.

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