

ICEA Position Paper

By Bonita Katz, IAT, ICCE, ICD and Kelli Barr-Lyles

The Role and Scope of Birth Doula Practice

Position

The concept of companionship during labor is well-documented from ancient times to the present. Today research overwhelmingly confirms that the presence of someone trained in labor support (a birth doula) benefits the laboring woman and her family in many ways. The International Childbirth Education Association recognizes the role of birth doulas as vital members of the health care team for childbearing women and their families.

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 healthcare decisions. In addition, they offer guidance and community resource referrals to families regarding maternal self-care, lactation, and other issues pertinent to the first six weeks postpartum.

The benefits of doula care are well-documented, including shorter labors, reduced use of Pitocin, lower cesarean rates, higher breastfeeding rates, and increased maternal satisfaction (Bohren, Hofmeyr, Sakala, Fukuzawa, Cuthbert, 2017) (Klaus, Kennell, Klaus, 2012).

Scope of Doula Practice

As a doula accompanies a woman in labor, her primary responsibility is to be present in every sense. A doula provides continuous care. Birth doulas provide care in a variety of locations and situations: at home, in birth centers, and in hospitals; during medicated and unmedicated vaginal births and in the operating room for cesarean births.

The facets of doula care are often divided into categories of physical, emotional, and informational support as well as the concept of advocacy. While this makes it easier to analyze the benefits of doula care, it is important to note that each of these categories overlaps and influences the others.

Physical Support

A doula physically supports the mother in a variety of ways. She will suggest alternative positions for the mother, remind her to maintain her fluid intake, make sure she goes to the bathroom frequently, or offer a cool washcloth for her forehead. A doula may help with coping skills such as breathing techniques, relaxation, or

visualization. She may suggest dimming the lights or playing music or other methods of creating an environment that is soothing for the mother.

A doula's hands-on skills may include massage, therapeutic touch, or counterpressure. This physical contact can provide not only comfort, but also emotional reassurance and support.

Emotional Support

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.

The foundation of emotional support is the doula's continuous presence. Words of praise and reassurance also encourage the laboring woman. Active listening during the birth and debriefing after the birth validate the woman's experience and provide an avenue for her to accept and process the birth of her baby in an emotionally healthy way.

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

Informational Support

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 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 on during labor.

Doulas also offer information to the partner or others present during the birth to help them understand the labor process and to possibly suggest comfort measures that they can use to help the laboring woman.

Advocacy

Advocacy is a part of doula care that has been the center of some controversy. In the context of doula care, advocacy is defined as supporting the woman "in their right to make decisions about their own body and baby" (Dekker, 2017). A doula should not speak for her client, but should encourage her client to communicate directly with the healthcare provider (HCP). Occasionally, a situation may arise in which the doula will remind a HCP of the client's wishes. This should be shared as a matter of open communication, not as confrontation.

During labor a doula may encourage the woman and/or her partner or others who are present to dialogue with their HCPs in order to obtain more information or to clarify what they do not understand. Supporting the woman's right to ask questions and encouraging her to communicate directly with the HCPs validates her role as the primary decision-maker concerning her healthcare. Taking an active part in this type of dialogue may also help her assimilate the role and responsibility of motherhood.

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 the procedure, explain why it is done, clarify the procedure's risks and benefits, and offer alternatives. As mentioned above, in many cases when clients have questions about medical issues the doula can consider this 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 promotes informed decision-making.

Doulas do not contradict health care providers. The woman and her family have chosen a provider that they 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.

Doula Responsibilities

An ICEA certified doula should reflect the core values of ICEA.

Compassion:

- Because her continuous presence is so integral to doula care, the doula should have arrangements providing for her client's care in case she is unable to attend the birth.
- A doula protects the privacy of her clients. No information should be shared unless the client has given her express consent.

Collaboration:

- A doula works as part of a health care team. She should respect the role of each member of the team by fostering open communication.

Choice:

- A doula provides evidence-based information for her clients in an unbiased manner.
- A doula advocates for her clients primarily by encouraging their direct communication with health care providers.

In addition, a doula should be clear about the business aspects of her work. Having written information or contracts will help eliminate any misunderstanding about the responsibilities of the doula or expectations of payment.

An ICEA certified doula is required to continue her education, completing at least 24 contact hours dealing with doula, childbirth education or the postpartum period.

incidence of postpartum depression. Because there are many benefits and no known adverse effects of doula care, ICEA recommends that the care of a birth doula be available to every woman who desires continuous labor support.

References

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Implications for Practice

Continuous, one-on-one support by birth doulas has been shown to reduce interventions and improve birth outcomes. More research is needed to explore potential long-term benefits such as increased breastfeeding, improved maternal-infant bonding, and reduced