

The Purpose and Value of a Doula

Labor and birth are among the most important and impacting events of a woman's life. Whether things go smoothly or are completely different than expected, a woman can still have a good childbirth experience. The satisfaction of the birth largely depends on the labor support she receives. If she is well supported (both emotionally and physically), respected, and informed, even the most unexpected turn of events in labor can end up being a positive memory which a woman can carry with her for the rest of her life. On the other hand, if a woman lacks this support it can cause emotional scarring that can be difficult to overcome.

Labor support comes in many forms: doctors, midwives, nurses, doulas, family, and friends. Medical personnel such as doctors, midwives, and nurses focus their attention on the health and safety of the mother and baby. Family and friends help with emotional and perhaps physical and spiritual aspects. A doula acts as a support person that incorporates a little of both roles. Although not medically trained, she is knowledgeable and experienced in the process of childbirth. She often spends time getting to know her client—her wants and needs, ideals and fears, and what's important to her. A doula gathers information so that her client can make informed choices both before labor and during, but she never makes decisions for the woman. She gives continuous emotional support during labor and has ideas for what may help the woman in whatever situation she may find herself in. A good doula encourages other people important to the woman to be part of the process by helping them be as involved as they are comfortable. "Doula" is the perfect word for this role, since its meaning is Greek for "a woman who serves."¹ This is the purpose of a doula: to serve the laboring woman and those involved so that a mother receives care that will allow her to view her birth experience in the most positive way possible.

The benefits of having a doula are profound. "Introducing a doula into the labor room not only improves the bond between mother and infant, but also seems to decrease the incidence of complications."² When trials and analysis of labor support were done in North America, rates of medical intervention were 26-41% less when a doula was present, and "obstetric outcomes were most improved and intervention rates were most dramatically lowered by doulas in settings where the women had no loved ones present, the intervention rates were routinely high (as indicated by the data for the control groups) and the doulas were not health care professionals."³ Women who incorporate a doula into their birth report higher levels of satisfaction and rate their birth experience higher than those who don't.⁴ Because it is important for a woman to feel completely relaxed and at ease during labor, it is imperative that she choose a doula with whom she is comfortable and can build a relationship of trust.

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A doula reduces the work load for the medical professional, because a supported woman is less likely to need medical intervention.⁵ For the family or friends of a laboring woman, the doula can be immensely helpful. She can guide the husband (or partner) who may not be familiar with the process of childbirth. Many times, a husband is able to enjoy the birth more if he is not the sole support for his wife.



A doula often has ideas for non-medical physical support that are based on experience. For the well-informed partner, she can be a second pair of hands for him, getting things to make his supporting role easier. Another invaluable benefit the doula provides is knowledge of or access to information when decisions need to be made. She can help a woman feel encouraged and validated if she chooses a different labor than her ideal. She often has skills to enhance communication between the laboring woman and her medical team.⁶

A doula must be careful not to overstep her bounds when it comes to her role and responsibilities. She must not take on medical or clinical responsibilities such as vaginal exams or offering second opinions.⁷ She can, however, help the woman understand what the results of an exam mean, or give her resources to find a second opinion. She does not make her own goals and values the priority, but instead is a supporter of the client's choices. While a doula cannot check bleeding or how stitches might be healing, she can help the postpartum woman review and emotionally unpack her birth. Often just talking to a woman about her birth experience can help her to understand how and why something happened, and quite often can facilitate the release of feelings of guilt, resentment, inadequacy, anger, or other negative emotions, even from previous births at which the doula was not present.

“Given the clear benefits and no known risks associated with intrapartum support, every effort should be made to ensure that all labouring women receive support, not only from those close to them but also from specially trained caregivers. This support should include continuous presence, the provision of hands-on comfort, and encouragement.”⁸ When looking at the cost of a doula, one must consider the recommendation given above. Though considered “a luxury” or “unnecessary” to some, the benefits of lower medical interventions (including Cesarean sections), help to the other members of the maternity care team, and higher satisfaction rate make a doula an invaluable asset to any woman expecting a child.

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Footnotes:

1. Simkin P, and Way, K. "DONA International Position Paper: The Birth Doula's Contribution to Modern Maternity Care," (2005), 1
2. Ibid, 3
3. Ibid
4. Ibid, 2
5. Ibid
6. "DONA International: Standards of Practice, Birth Doula" (2008), 1
7. Ibid
8. Simkin P, and Way, K., 4