

*Doulas Deliver Tender Loving Care To Moms*

# Post-natal Pampering Provides a Homecoming Miracle



Stephen Castagnier/Connecticut Status

Vivian Arnold (left) a doula, holding newborn Eleanor while her twin sister, Elizabeth, is held by Julie Trelstad, the babies' mother.

**W**hen Julie Trelstad of Fairfield came home from the hospital with her newborn twin daughters last month, there might as well have been a miracle awaiting her.

The house was clean, dinner was cooked - even the bathroom sparkled. All Trelstad - a 26-year old book editor who didn't even know how to change a diaper - had to do was crawl into bed, cuddle her two babies, and get the rest she needed after a Caesarean delivery.

What, you ask, was the source of this near-miracle?

The Trelstads had been given the gift of doula services for the month before the babies were born - when Trelstad was ordered to bed by her doctor - and for the postpartum period.

For those of you not up on your Greek, a doula is a woman who helps take care of a new mother so that the mother can take care of the baby.

While nearly unheard of in the United States, the custom of having a doula come to the house after a birth is standard procedure in many other countries. In Holland, for example, doula services are considered part of the health care system.

"New mothers need and deserve to have help during this critical time," says Sheila Marley of Milford, who, with her best friend Sue Keeney, started MothersCare, a doula service, last year. "Women

think they have to be Superwoman, that they have to prove they can handle everything. They now go home from the hospital, in many cases, 24 hours after delivery, and expect themselves to be up and running the house immediately. It doesn't work that way."

In the old days, new moms were pampered by their female relatives, who cooked, ran errands and took care of the other children in the family. But these days, doula advocates say, families are splintered, and very rarely is there anyone around who has the time to take off work to make sure a new mother is doing well.

"So many times women come home from the hospital and are completely isolated and overwhelmed by baby care," says Keeney, who is the mother of five children, the last two twins.

In fact, it was Keeney's rather desperate situation last year that got MothersCare started in the first place. Marley threw her a baby shower just before the twins were born, and essentially told all the guests in attendance: "Look, guys, she'll be coming home from the hospital to four kids under the age of 4 and one 11-year-old. Who's going to help out? Let's all take turns going over and cooking dinner and cleaning the house for her."

For two weeks, Keeney says, her friends showed up daily and ran her household, permitting her to stay in bed and get her strength back.

It was, she says, an eye-opener.

"I thought, this is how life is supposed to be. When you're just home with a baby, your attention should be on taking care of yourself and getting to know the baby, not whether your toilet is clean or not. But too often, you can't concentrate on yourself until you know that everything else is done."

Fran Morrow of Milford says her doula, Sandy Valero, made her first two weeks home with the baby completely relaxed.

"I had no idea what it was like to have a baby, and having her there to do things for me, and just to be able to talk to her, was such a comfort," she says. "The first day I was watching TV, and she came in with carrot sticks for my snack, without me even asking. She seemed to know just what I needed."

Keeney and Marley say that doulas have been shown to help ease or even prevent post-partum depression in women they help.

"When women have support, when they don't feel as if they have to do everything, the normal fluctuations aren't as extreme," says Keeney. "They know they can rest."

Vivian Arnold, who has been helping out at the Trelstads' house for the past two months, says she feels it's a privilege to be able to help new mothers this way.

"To me it's so rewarding because you get to watch a new mother bonding with her baby. You help her relax so she can enjoy her baby, and you know that you've really given them a good start

together," she says.

Trelstad says, "I felt funny at first about whether I'd be able to ask her to wait on me," she says, "but when Vivian arrived, the first thing she handed me was a list of The Ten Commandments for New Mothers."

The Ten Commandments includes such covenants as: "Thou shalt remain clothed in thy nightgown and sit in thy rocking chair as long as thou pleaseth," and "Thou shalt not cook, clean house, do laundry or entertain."

"After reading that," says Trelstad, "I really realized that she was there to help me. She really made it possible for me to breastfeed my twins, too. She doesn't give advice unless I ask for it, and then everything she says is supportive and helpful. I don't know how I'm going to get along without her when she leaves."

A doula, through MothersCare, costs about \$28 per hour, and doulas come for four-hour blocks. Package deals are also available.

"It's not an expensive service, when you consider how much it helps you," says Marley. "In fact, the entire two weeks of care by a doula can be paid for by the amount of money you save by coming home from the hospital just one day early."

For information on MothersCare, call 203-375-5719.

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