

"Support for New Mothers, Thy Name is 'Doula'"

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You could call her a mom's mom, or as the word Doula means in ancient Greek, female slave. Just don't call her a baby nurse.

A Doula, in the modern incarnation, is a trained helper whose job it is to nurture the mother during and just after childbirth.

For a woman in labor, a Doula might ease the pain of contractions by rubbing the mother-to-be's back, massaging her feet, maybe combing her hair.

When the baby comes home, a Doula will do the laundry, cook meals, clean toilets, entertain older children, and even sew on buttons.

"If you can imagine having a fairy godmother, that's what a postpartum Doula is," said Sheila Marley, co owner of MothersCare Doula Services, based in West Haven.

As mother's day arrives, the word Doula (pronounced doo-la). Despite its archaic root, is entering the modern English lexicon as the latest trend in childbirth and new parenting.

Danbury hospital recently began offering a labor support Doula to any woman who gives birth at the hospital. And Kaiser Permanente Health Plan of Connecticut now pays for 20 hours of Doula care if a new mother agrees to leave the hospital within 24 hours.

"We found moms were on the fence; they were kind of interested in going home, but wanted more support than just a nurse," said Pam Burris, a prenatal clinical nurse specialist with Kaiser.

"When a mother goes home with a newborn, a Doula fills the role that grandmothers, aunts or best friends performed in the days before family members lived airplane-trips apart and friends were consumed by careers," Marley said.

Most commonly, a Doula will shop for groceries, cook food and stock some away in the freezer, do light housekeeping and answer questions about breastfeeding, diapering, or baby's first bath. But the Doula's job can be as varied as the mothers who hire them. Last week, a Doula stayed up all night rocking a newborn, so this single mother could rest between breast feedings. In the morning, she made the mother breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen.

In households with cooks and housekeepers, a Doula might offer to do the little chores that can drive even the most organized mother crazy... cleaning out the spice rack to consolidate three cinnamons, or sewing on a button. They have cleaned out refrigerators and emptied burnt crumbs from the bottom of a toaster. Doula Debbie Martinelli dusted the tops of one mother's kitchen cabinets, the part nobody can see or reach.

"I remember the first day, I was so exhausted I hadn't thought of what I wanted her to do," said Mary Ann Creto, of Farmington, who used a Doula for several weeks after the recent birth of her second child, Katherine. "I said I have to sleep now. I walked downstairs (later) and the whole kitchen was clean."

Tough To Teach

Although many postpartum Doula's receive some training from the agencies that hire them, it is impossible to teach somebody to be a Doula, Marley said. A good Doula is like a kind, intuitive mom who gets satisfaction from just pampering a new parent.

"Everybody pays attention to the baby. Everybody just forgets about you. Doula's mother the mother," Marley said. "You should be pampered, but you can't relax if dust balls are forming under the table and company is coming and you have to give them tea and cookies."

The first postpartum Doula services were started in Massachusetts, Rhode island, and New York City in the early 1980's, sparked, some say, by a 1973 book "A Tender Gift" in which Dana Raphael, a medical anthropologist, spoke of women teaching women about mothering, and coined the term Doula.

The trend spread westward and now there is at least one postpartum Doula service in every state registered with the National Association of Postpartum Care Services, a trade group of postpartum Doula's.

Doula's of North America, which represents labor support Doula's, now has 2,025 members, up from 30 just five years ago.

Marley started her Doula service in 1993 with her best friend, Susan Keeney, whose family had just grown from three to five children with the birth of twins.

Susan's mother had helped after the birth of her first two children, but had passed away by the time the third was born. Susan juggled all three youngsters alone and the memory made her panic about the pending arrival of twins.

Marley gave her a shower and in place of gifts passed around a calendar on which friends were to fill in dates when they would cook and clean for the Keeney family.

The twins were born around thanksgiving, and Susan came home to a neat house with a turkey browning in the oven.

"Here I am, at 4 p.m. in my robe, the house is clean and these smells are wafting through my house," Susan recalled. "I felt so taken care of, really nurtured."

When another friend told her "we're your Doula's," Susan had no idea what she was talking about. But about a week later, she read an article about Doula's in a parenting magazine.

And one night, at 3 a.m., she hit on a way to help other mothers while helping her husband provide for their now-large family. She waited until 7 a.m. to call Marley with the idea.

MothersCare Doula Services, which started serving only Fairfield and New Haven counties, has expanded into the Hartford area and now can serve clients as far away as Massachusetts.

Reducing Cesareans

A Doula from MothersCare is paid on an hourly rate, with a four-hour minimum. They also offer Doula's in an overnight capacity with an eight-hour minimum. The service can also supply a labor support Doula for a fixed amount, which covers unlimited telephone calls to the Doula before and during early labor, bedside help in the hospital from admission until after delivery, and photographs of the birth.

Danbury Hospital has recently started subsidizing the cost of labor support Doula's for its patients with the goal of reducing the number of cesarean sections performed and the amount of pain relieving medication used during delivery.

Studies have shown that continuous labor support can shorten the duration of labor by almost 3 hours, can cut in half the frequency of cesarean delivery and reduces the use of labor inducing drugs and forceps.

While it is too soon to measure the success for Danbury's Doula program, early statistics are promising, said Dr. Lester Silberman, chairman of obstetrics and gynecology there. Of 83 Doula assisted deliveries, there have been nine cesarean sections, about 11 percent. Statewide, 19.1 percent of all births in Connecticut hospitals were performed by cesarean section in 1995.

Patients there pay \$50 for a labor support Doula, no matter how long the labor lasts.

Sandy McGuire, coordinator of Danbury's Doula program, said the Doula's job is not to take the place of the nurse or father. She recalled entering one laboring mother's room and finding the husband sitting at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed. It wasn't that he didn't want to help, he just didn't know how, she said.

McGuire suggested that the father do some massage, and he was able to make his wife more comfortable right up to delivery. Meanwhile, McGuire talked the mother to be through every contraction.

"Our nursing staff is great, but they can't be in the room all the time," McGuire said. We don't change shifts, we stay from the time they come in until several hours postpartum."

In addition to making labor more comfortable, Doula services can be cost effective, Silberman said. For example, a full labor that ends up in cesarean section can cost \$12,600 at Danbury. The same labor ending in a vaginal delivery costs only \$7,700. And that does not account for the physical and emotional toll of major surgery.

Although the hospital initially encountered some opposition from the nurses, who feared that their roles might be usurped by untrained and unlicensed Doulas, the clinical staff, McGuire said, has now embraced the program.

After all, McGuire said, it's only natural. "You look at ancient paintings of the birthing and what do you see? Women," she said. "It was a bit sticky in the beginning, but it's not clinical. All we are is hand-holders"