

# CAPPA Position Paper

## Evidence-Based Labor Doula Care

### Introduction

Having a baby is an experience that is remembered forever. It is an experience that changes the dynamics of a family as well as the entire life of each family member. It is more than just another day, and the way a birth unfolds will effect a woman's (and her husband or partner's) confidence in herself as a person and mother, her self-esteem, and her relationships with others.

CAPPA believes that women in labor require the safety of obstetrical care, by a qualified physician or midwife, however they also require emotional support, information, reassurance, encouragement, respect, and love. Each woman will require different things, both medically and emotionally due to her individual situations and desires. Throughout history, laboring women have been surrounded and attended by other women. There was usually a midwife present and then one or more other women to help the mother to remain as comfortable as possible, and to comfort, reassure, and protect her space as she labors. A labor doula can meet many of these non-medical needs and assist the woman's caregivers in their goal of a good outcome for mother and baby and a good birth experience for the mother.

### Labor Doulas as Part of the Birth Team

Today, labor doulas continue this tradition of providing support, information, and non-medical comfort measures to assist the laboring mother. Labor doulas are professionals, trained and experienced in childbirth. The labor doula provides physical, emotional, and informational support to the mother and others who are attending her. The labor doula will assist the father or other birth partners by giving suggestions of things that will help the mother, giving them a break, and making sure that they eat, drink, and rest to maintain their strength. The labor doula will assist the family to gather information and ask the questions necessary to make informed decisions when the need arises, although she will never make decisions for them. She will assist the mother and her partner to find the best methods to relax and encourage labor, including helping with positioning, breathing, relaxation, massage, and other comfort measures. The labor

doula will never leave the laboring woman, maintaining continuity of care throughout the labor and birth.

A labor doula will not perform any medical tasks, such as fetal or maternal monitoring or vaginal exams. A labor doula will not give medical advice or second opinions, and will not project her own goals onto a laboring woman. Labor doulas work to help the woman have a safe and satisfying birth experience, according to the mother's goals. When a doula is present, many women find there is less need for pain medication, while other women may choose to utilize pain medication to assist them as they labor. A labor doula is beneficial to a woman who has chosen pain medication as she continues to provide reassurance, comfort measures, and information.

A labor doula will never replace the mother's partner (her husband, the baby's father, or other friends or loved ones). The partner provides love and support that the labor doula can never provide, as he/she knows the mother intimately and possesses a love that can come from no one else. The labor doula and the partner, in conjunction with the chosen caregivers, form the perfect support system for the laboring mother. The labor doula can assist the partner, provide suggestions for him/her, and allow the partner to participate at his/her comfort level.

### Research on Labor Doulas

In recent years, a tremendous amount of research has been done surrounding the importance and benefit of having a labor doula assist as a part of the birth team. Research shows that having a labor doula "reduces the overall cesarean rate by 50%, the length of labor by 25%, Oxytocin use by 40%, pain medication by 30%, the need for forceps by 40%, and requests for epidurals by 60%".<sup>1</sup> Mothers who were attended by labor doulas also felt their birth experiences were more positive, their self-image was improved, they felt their babies were healthier, and they felt their relationship with their husband/partner was improved. ( *Mothering the Mother* by Klaus, Kennell, and Klaus)<sup>1</sup>

In Chicago, the Chicago Doula Project was started to assist pregnant teens. The Chicago Doula Project was a

collaborative effort of three agencies: Chicago Health Connection; the Ounce of Prevention Fund; and the Illinois Department of Human Services. The teen moms who worked with a labor doula had 43% fewer cesarean sections, 74% fewer epidurals, and 70% higher initial breastfeeding rates. This is a tremendous achievement for a group of already at-risk teen moms.

In 1999, the Cochrane Library reported on 14 clinical studies involving more than 5000 women. They found that with the continuous presence of a support person, the likelihood of episiotomy, cesarean delivery, operative vaginal delivery, medication for pain relief, and a 5-minute apgar score for the baby was reduced. They also noted a slight decrease in duration of labor with a support person present.<sup>14</sup>

Having a labor doula has also been studied in regards to breastfeeding initiation and success. In a study done in Mexico and reported in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, they found that significantly more mothers were exclusively breastfeeding at one month past delivery. More of the mothers who had labor doulas also felt they had a high degree of control over the birth experience than those mothers not attended by a labor doula.<sup>13</sup>

A meta-analysis of 11 clinical trials showed that having a labor doula with you continuously throughout labor significantly shortened labor, and decreased the need for analgesia, Oxytocin, cesarean sections, and forceps.<sup>12</sup> Another meta-analysis again showed shortened labors and decreased use of cesarean births, forceps and vacuum extraction, Oxytocin administration, and analgesia. Mothers who used labor doulas for their births also rated childbirth as less difficult and painful than those mothers not supported by a labor doula.<sup>11,13,17</sup>

## CAPPA Labor Doula Training and Certification

CAPPA believes that all women who want a labor doula should have one and to ensure this, CAPPA encourages labor doulas to become trained and certified. CAPPA provides the highest quality trainings and focuses on teaching non-medical comfort measures (such as massage, positioning, breathing, relaxation, etc), how to assist the laboring mother (and her partner) emotionally, and how to start and run a labor doula practice. To attain certification as a CAPPA labor doula, the doula must have a background in childbirth or attend an approved childbirth class series, read books from the approved reading list, pass a written exam, and provide positive evaluations from three mothers they have worked with, their physicians or midwives, and their nurses.

## Conclusion

Based on the evidence and research available, labor doulas can be an integral part of the laboring mother's support system. Labor doulas improve the outcome, both medically and emotionally, for the mother and her partner as well as the baby. CAPPA supports the availability of labor doulas to all who want one.

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