

Dads & Doulas

by Penny Simkin

Myth 1

If a woman has her partner, the doula becomes redundant.

Reality

The doula may be the only person at the labor besides the partner who is there solely for the emotional well-being of the woman. The nurse, the doctor, the midwife have other priorities that compete with the emotional care of the woman: for example, breaks, shift changes, clinical responsibilities, office hours and hospital policies. The doula has few or no other priorities. She stays through shift changes, and until after the baby is born. She is not just another stranger with the couple. She has the woman's needs as her sole priority. In some cases, the couple will bring several other friends or family members into labor with them. Sometimes these people can be uncertain of how to help which leads to confusion and actually adds to the woman's stress. The doula can direct and coordinate the efforts of a group of people, giving them all some-thing useful to do, so they work as a team on the woman's behalf.

Myth 2

The doula "takes over", displacing the partner and interferes with their intimate experience.

Reality

The doula can actually bring the couple closer. By making sure that the partner's needs are met (food, drink, occasional back rubs, and reassurance), the woman and partner can work more closely together. The doula allows for the partner to participate at his own comfort level. Some partners prefer to be there only to witness the birth of their child and to share this experience with the woman they love. They may not want to play an active role and do not want to be responsible for the woman's comfort and emotional security. The doula can fill in and allow the partner to participate as he wishes, without leaving the woman's needs unmet. When the partner chooses to be the major source of emotional support, the doula can supplement his or her efforts by running errands, making suggestions for comfort measures, and offering words of reassurance and comfort. During a long tiring labor, she can give the partner a break for a brief rest or change of scene. While the doula probably knows more than the partner about birth, hospitals, and maternity care, the partner knows more about the woman's personality, likes and dislikes, and needs. Moreover, he loves the woman more than anyone else there. The combined contributions of partner and doula, along with a competent, considerate and caring staff gives the woman the best chance of an optimal outcome.

Myth 3

The doula has her own beliefs about how the birth should go, and imposes it on the woman or couple.

Reality

The doula's true agenda is to help ensure that the woman's or couple's agenda is acknowledged and followed as much as possible. If the doula is thoroughly familiar with the couple's wishes and their birth plan, she may actually think more about it than the couple, especially when labor is intense and things are happening rapidly. The doula can remind the staff or the couple of some items on the birth plan that are forgotten, but which later might be important. Sometimes if a birth plan is not followed, the couple later look back with regret or disappointment. The doula helps with decision-making by asking questions that will ensure that the right information is given to the woman or couple so that they can make an informed decision. She may also suggest alternatives for the couple to consider. She does not, however, make decisions for the couple. In summary, the doula helps make the birth experience to be as rewarding and satisfying as possible. As one father said, "I heaved a big sigh of relief when she (the doula) walked in. I hadn't realized how much pressure I had been feeling. She not only calmed my wife, she calmed me down."