

New Father Becomes Doula Promoter

Robert Arnason Winnipeg Free Press April 28, 2004

ATTENTION pregnant women: If a man approaches you and starts talking about doulas, do not be afraid. "When I see a pregnant woman, I ask her if she is using a doula for the birth. If she isn't, I tell her right away to hire a doula," says Stephen Penner, whose wife Audra gave birth to their son Samuel with the help of a doula.

Doulas are women who "mother the mother." They provide information on birth options prior to labour, support during labour, and post-partum help. A recent study from the University of Toronto nursing faculty indicates that using a doula results in higher satisfaction in the birth experience for the mother-to-be and less need for pain medication during labour. Penner became a doula promoter this year after Tara Laba, a doula from Birth Roots Doula Collective, helped his wife get through a 33-hour labour to deliver their first child. "After 15 hours we were delirious," he says. Despite the extremely long labour, with no drugs, Audra Penner describes her birth experience as extremely positive. "It was unbelievable," says Audra, who eventually gave birth to Samuel on New Year's Day. "When things were stressful, Tara slowed us down so we weren't panicky and reminded us of our birth plan."

Doulas meet with the parents a few times before the due date for pre-natal education and to discuss a birth plan. The plan lays out how you want to have your baby, and whether to use pain medication. "People hear 'doula' and they think drug-free. But I'm not there to promote an agenda," says Laba, who acts as a consultant, explaining the pros and cons of drugs and other birth options. "We don't make decisions for the parents." Doulas are often confused with midwives, but their jobs are different.

Midwives are trained to do medical procedures and to make medical decisions that ensure the health of the baby. The focus of the doula is on the mother's mental, emotional, and physical health. Their biggest job is labour support and they go to the hospital to help the mom through the hours leading to birth. They also provide post-partum support at home, especially if the mom has had a rough delivery or post-partum health problems. Some women hire doulas to help out in the first weeks after birth if they don't have any relatives handy.

"Having a doula there really frees us up to focus our care on the baby, like doing the vital signs," says Kassandra Swerdyliak, a nurse in the Labour Delivery Recovery Postpartum Unit at St. Boniface Hospital. "The number of moms who come with a doula is few and far between," says Swerdyliak, who estimates one out of 30 mothers come to the hospital with a doula. "Definitely, they should be used more." Swerdyliak says having a doula in hospital means consistency of care. "With shift changes, you may not have anyone there who knows your birth plan.

The doula is someone you trust and already have a relationship with." Audra had done some research prior to Samuel's birth and found out that when supported by a doula, women are less likely to have a caesarean birth and less likely to use pain medication. But when Audra first put forward the idea of a doula, Stephen's reaction was not positive. He felt it was his role to be the support during labour. "I said, 'Absolutely not. I can do the job,'" says Stephen. He was swayed after he met Laba and witnessed her calm manner and listened to her knowledge of birth options.

He was convinced after witnessing his wife go through labour. "You think you are prepared, but when it actually happens you're like a deer caught in headlights," says Stephen. When difficult choices arise during labour, the doula is there to help panicking parents make a decision that is right for them. For example, the nurse might suggest speeding up labour. A doula can explain the pros and cons of taking an IV drug to augment labour. "We explain the benefits and drawbacks of each choice," says Laba, who together with Deanna Momtchilov and Julia Allen, founded Birth Roots Doula Collective in Winnipeg in 2000 after they attended a doula training course together.

Doulas are educated by doula associations -- the most recognized being the Doulas of North America. Official certification as a profession is a goal for the future in Manitoba. "We are finding that as people learn more about doulas, they want to include us as a part of their birth," says Laba. She adds that two years ago Birth Roots saw four clients per month, and now they have close to 20 clients per month. "People are glad they can find this kind of service here in Manitoba," says Laba, who recently hired another doula to meet demand. They now have nine doulas on staff. "Each month that we are around, we find that we're more and more popular," she says.

Up to this point, word of mouth is driving the surge in doula popularity here in Winnipeg. And with Stephen Penner stopping every pregnant woman who crosses his path, the word on doulas will continue to spread.