

CAPPA Position Paper

Evidence-based Postpartum Doula Care

Introduction

Many birth professionals feel the postpartum adjustment period lasts well into the first year, making the fourth trimester the longest. In her book *Mothering the New Mother*, Sally Placksin states "It seems more accurate and more realistic to offer women a broad timetable of postpartum cushioning that covers the first twelve months of new motherhood. Some women will feel that they have settled in a shorter period of time; others will find it might take longer, depending in what kind of support they have to help them."

When considering birth in industrialized societies, birth is relegated to three trimesters. Rarely is the final and most life altering time period, the postpartum period or fourth trimester considered. By medical definition, the postpartum period is the six weeks following the birth of a baby or completion of pregnancy. This is the period where the woman's body returns to its pre-pregnant state. Many birthing professionals recognize that this adjustment period is not only physical but also emotional, intellectual and relational.

The impact of rituals on the physical, emotional, intellectual and relational aspects of the postpartum period is undeniable. Research indicates that the lack of effective rituals of reintegration may be a cause of postpartum disorders. The transitional adjustment period between birth and parenthood should include rituals such as baby care basics, the role of the new family, emotional support, breastfeeding or bottlefeeding support, and maternal mentoring. These rituals, when present in sufficient quantity, empowers society by empowering the family unit by increasing the confidence level and increasing the incidence of positive parenting experiences.

In many cultures, women and their families are cared for and nurtured by the community around them for weeks, and sometimes months after the birth of a new family member. Women living in kin-based communities adhere to customary postpartum rituals and typically do not experience postpartum disorders. They also tend to breastfeed their babies for a longer period of time and feel closer to their infants than women who have had no support. Strong social support is vital.

In today's mobile society, extended families do not live close and may be unable to provide care for the new family. New parents may expect medical professionals to provide not only informational support but also educational and physical/emotional support outside of the hospital setting. When this support from family or professionals is lacking, mentoring is then lost. This is where the postpartum doula can be an invaluable resource, by bridging the gap and providing the missing mentoring opportunity.

From Marshall H. Klaus, John H. Kennell and Phyllis H. Klaus in *Mothering the Mother*, "Most studies show that a person's previous history or a family history of psychiatric problems increases the chances of postpartum depression. In most cases, however, psychosocial factors are important. The woman may be experiencing bereavement, the effects of unemployment or inadequate income, unsatisfactory housing, or unsupportive relationships. The experience of childbirth may have aroused memories of a past stillbirth or miscarriage, abortion or death of her mother. When a woman has had a poor relationship to her own mother or was separated from one or both parents before the age of eleven, she is more likely to be depressed and anxious. Another factor may be the woman's inability to confide in her partner or a friend. Women are often embarrassed to tell another how badly she feels. Loneliness, isolation and lack of support are serious contributors to postpartum depression. Some mothers may find it difficult to reconcile the realities of mothering with their prenatal fantasies."

The Role of the Doula

Although some families have all the support they need from their extended families and community, this type of care can be rare. When family members are not able to provide the support during the postpartum period, the Postpartum doula is a viable option. Postpartum doulas are knowledgeable professionals who assist families during the critical period immediately after the birth of their baby. They "mother the mother" and offer physical, emotional and informational support to the family as well as practical help. The doula's expertise in mother and baby care enables her to

assist with postpartum comfort measures, breastfeeding support, non-judgmental guidance in infant care techniques, information on normal postpartum restoration, and family emotional assistance through this major transition.

Postpartum doulas are trained to know when things are not progressing normally and how to utilize available resources plus suggest referrals for help when appropriate. Doulas have a deep respect for the family structure and know how to balance information and help in a way which empowers the new parents to care for their own baby while at the same time offering guidance and support. In turn, this gives the parents a sense of accomplishment and success in their parenting skills. While fulfilling this role, the doula may also perform light household chores, provide meal preparation, sibling care and parent education, all while nurturing the family in a nonjudgmental, objective way.

The postpartum doula does not provide medical care for the mother or baby, however she may provide extensive information regarding maternal/child health during the normal postpartum period. The postpartum doula should be well acquainted with the professionals in her community who can help the postpartum family, such as physicians and midwives, lactation consultants and educators, pediatricians, counselors and support groups. Her vast knowledge of the birth and postpartum process makes the postpartum doula a valued member of the birth team.

CAPPA Training and Certification Process

Critical to a comprehensive training and certification program is the quality of the evidence-based standard of care and scope of practice. Persons interested in pursuing a career in postpartum care should investigate certifying organizations for philosophy, inclusiveness, perspectives, research-based curriculum, efficacy of trainers, and follow-up during the certification process and post-certification. Training for postpartum doula care should include but not be limited to newborn care and feeding methods, comprehensive care of the postpartum woman, infant development, postpartum depression, support of the postpartum family, coping skills, developing resources, working within the birthing community, and business development skills

Conclusion

With changes taking place in the family structure over many years, and new families not having the resources available to them as in the past, the postpartum doula is making a significant impact on the process that takes place in the postpartum period. All the research seems to indicate this to be a very positive impact. The fourth trimester can be a very turbulent time for some families in that they have limited resources for support. The postpartum doula fills a void left by families not being close enough or able to offer help, and reassurance while parents adjust to their new role and responsibilities. New families deserve the support and encouragement a postpartum doula can give.

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