First Nations Families & Doulas

National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)
Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)
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What is a Doula?

The term *doula* is defined as:…a Greek word meaning *a woman who serves*. In labour support terminology, *doula* refers to a specially trained birth companion (not a friend or loved one) who provides labour support. She performs no clinical tasks. *Doula* also refers to laywomen who are trained or experienced in providing postpartum care (mother and newborn care, breastfeeding support and advice, cooking, child care, errands, and light cleaning) for the new family. To distinguish between the two types of doulas, the term *birth doulas* and *postpartum doulas* are used.[1]

NAMING *DOULAS* IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

In Indigenous communities, the name *doula* is often replaced with another term. At the American Indian Family Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, the women chose to be called "*Turtle Women*" because the "turtle symbolizes creation." The project stresses that *Turtle Women* receive "DONA *training for doulas*, but they also have the knowledge that comes from being American Indian."[4] Likewise, in a First Nations community in British Columbia, the women participating in a Doulas of North America (DONA) certified training workshop preferred to be called "*aunties*" instead of *doulas*. Carol Lynch, a certified *doula*, was given the name "Toonova'hehe," meaning "Holding Women" in her Northern Cheyenne language class when she described her profession.[5] In Kanesatake, Québec, a well-respected grandmother of the community was trained as a *doula* and a lactation consultant. Her title was "Ka'nistenhsera Teiakontihsnie,"(KT), meaning "she who helps the mother."[6]

"Birth is the fundamental ceremony of our tribes. It is the most sacred ceremony that we have." CAROL COUCHIE, MIDWIFE

BENEFITS OF UNINTERRUPTED LABOUR SUPPORT VS BIRTHS WITHOUT CONTINUOUS SUPPORT

Scott et al. (1999) analyzed 12 clinical studies and found that there was a:
51% reduction in caesarian births
25% reduction in labour length (average of 98 minutes)
35% reduction in analgesia
71% reduction in oxytocin augmentation and
57% reduction in use of forceps/vacuum.[8]

DOULA SUPPORT HAS SIX MAIN FUNCTIONS

These are to:

- Recognize birth as a key life experience.
- Nurture and protect a women's memory of birth.
- Maintain an uninterrupted presence during labour and birth.
- Recognize the effects of emotions on the physiology of labour.
- Provide comfort techniques and encourage positions that promote progress during labour.
- Promote early breastfeeding and *bonding*.[2]

For First Nations families, doulas have the potential to make positive contributions to situations where women are birthing away from their home communities. They can act as communicators and advocates for the birthing family, and can facilitate incorporating traditional practices into the childbirth process, if the family desires this.

Traditionally, women supporting women during childbirth has been an important part of the childbearing process. It is described as an ancient and widespread practice, and that "one of the most profound changes in the childbirth process during the 20th century was to isolate labouring women from her social supportive network."[3] For First Nations families, this impact is often greater, especially in remote regions where women are required to leave their home communities to give birth.

Although there has been no research about *doula* care specific to First Nations people in Canada, there have been **numerous studies** illustrating that continuous social support during labour has positive impacts on not only labour and delivery, but also on breastfeeding rates and attachment.

"This is the place of power. It is the woman's power to give birth. And it is our role to help her come to that place where she feels that strength and finds the strength to do this." CHRISTINE ROY, MIDWIFE

What is the difference between a midwife and a *Doula*?
Doulas do not provide medical care, and do not deliver babies. Midwives are trained to provide all necessary medical care and ensure the health and well-being of the mother and baby. *Doulas* work as a part of the team, with a midwife or doctor and nurse, and are a positive addition to the birth team for those couples who desire extra support.[7]

What do *Doula* services cost?
Currently *doula* services can range between $250–$800.00 per childbirth, although some clinics have provided similar services to clients within First Nations communities in Canada. Across Canada, many First Nations communities and organizations are finding new ways of incorporating *doula* training and care in their communities.

How Can I become a *Doula*?
Contact one of the national associations to discuss the training closest to you. Once you have become a certified doula you may register with a Doula Association. Culturally specific doula training for First Nations is being developed in several provinces across Canada, including British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Québec.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON DOULA SERVICES OR TO LOCATE A DOULA IN YOUR AREA, CONTACT:

National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) – **www.naho.ca**
Doula Care – **www.doulacare.ca**
Canadian Doula Association – **www.canadiandoulas.com**
Doulas of North America – **www.dona.org**

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4. O'Sullivan, Elizabeth. *The Turtle Women.* Mothering Magazine, Issue 127, November/December 2004.
5. Lynch, Carol. Doulas: *Holding Women.* The Indian Health Service Provider, November 1998.
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