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They Deliver

Doulas can ease the stress of childbirth.

Maayan Jaffe
Staff Reporter

You find out you're pregnant. *Mazel tov*, as Jews like to say. You spend eight months preparing for the new baby and finally you're in the final stretch, the ninth inning, so to speak. You want everything to go perfectly. Say experts in the field: Consider a doula.

The term "doula" comes from the Greek word meaning "woman servant" or "mother's helper." In America, doulas are volunteers or paid women professionals who aid mothers-to-be in labor. They're there to calm the birthing mother, offer pain management techniques like massage, visual imagery, acupressure, herbs, oils, aromatherapy, lights and music.

The number of doulas in America has spiked in recent years. For example, DONA International's membership has grown from 750 in 1994 to more than 6,000 in 2007. The group is the oldest doula association in the world.

Why the increase? Well, said Upper Park Heights resident Miriam Sperling, who co-directs Sinai Hospital's doula program, clinical studies show having a doula at birth tends to result in shorter labors, reduces negative feelings about childbirth, the need for pitocin (a labor-inducing drug) and mothers' requests for pain medication, such as epidurals. She also noted that according to the DONA site, patients who use a doula are less likely to suffer from postpartum depression.

"I've never heard of anyone who said she wasn't happy [with her birth] when she had a doula," says Mrs. Sperling. "They are all happy."

Mrs. Sperling's program trains 12 to 15 doulas per year. The doulas undergo a two-day intensive course

and then are required to volunteer for a minimum of five labors. After each labor, the doula-to-be is evaluated by the patient, lead physician and nurses and offered feedback. After receiving certification, they can begin to charge and work privately as doulas; Mrs. Sperling said many of her students continue as volunteers as well.

In addition to the local program, there are numerous international programs that offer certification. Jamie Rubin runs In Due Time. Based in the Seven Mile area, she received training at Sinai and certification through Childbirth International. She said there are no continuing education requirements, but she keeps up with trends and regularly challenges herself with additional courses to offer more to her clients. (Mrs. Rubin charges \$400 to \$750 per labor, which includes two to three prenatal visits, unlimited prenatal phone support, labor support at home and/or the birthing location, and a postpartum visit.)

In Mrs. Rubin's experience, there's "a really big need" for doulas in Baltimore. She said, in other cultures, women birth with mother's helpers. In America, since the doctor basically comes in the room to deliver the baby, the mother — and father, if she is lucky — is left alone. Spending a lot of time alone while at the high emotional state one is at during labor, explained Mrs. Rubin, can be traumatic.

Mrs. Rubin describes herself as there for the family unit and she helps the father, too, offering him hints to help make his wife more comfortable. She'll remind him to eat and drink, and get rest so he can be a better support person. She might show him where his wife is harboring tension and teach him to massage her here or there.



Jamie Rubin and Shoshana Lerner run private doula practices.

PHOTO: BRIAN P. MILLER

And doulas, according to Mrs. Sperling, likewise are trained to work with the hospital staff.

"We work hard to help the doulas see medical responsibility belongs to the hospital staff and that they are there to communicate the patients' request and what is important to her — without being oppositional," she says.

Shoshana Lerner recently launched Hands & Heart Doula Service in Pikesville. A mother of seven children, Mrs. Lerner said she's seen it all and

knows that women in America need to take back the birthing process from the hospitals. She said statistics prove the more interventions a woman has during the labor, the more likely she is to undergo a Caesarean birth, which has its own set of complications.

"God made women's bodies to birth babies," says Mrs. Lerner. "It's not a disease or a sickness.... Western medicine has stripped women of their confidence in giving birth."

Mrs. Lerner said she's been a doula for 10 births in the last year. Of those, only 1 (10 percent) resulted in a C-section. The national average, according to a 2004 study by the Centers for Disease Control, is 29.1 percent. Similarly, she said only four (40 percent) of her clients opted for epidural anesthesia. According to the American Pregnancy Association, last year

more than 50 percent of women giving birth at hospitals used an epidural. "Birthing is such a spiritual event. It's beautiful. It's OK to work hard at birth — you are getting a tremendous gift," Mrs. Lerner says.

Karen Furman lives in the Cheswolde area. She used a doula for the last two of her four labors. What does she have to say? "It was fabulous!"

Mrs. Furman describes the back and foot massages her doula provided, as well as her help with breathing techniques and "simply holding my hand."

Says Mrs. Furman: "It's good to have a female there — only females can understand females during birth. Men just don't." □

The Doula Difference:

- 60 percent reduction in epidural requests
- 50 percent reduction in Caesarean rate
- 40 percent reduction in oxytocin use
- 40 percent reduction in forceps delivery
- 30 percent reduction in analgesia use
- 25 percent shorter labor

Source: "Mothering the Mother: How a Doula Can Help You Have a Shorter, Easier and Healthier Birth" by Marshall H. Klaus, M.D., John H. Kennell, M.D., and Phyllis Klaus, M.Ed., C.S.W. (Perseus Books Group 1993)

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Doula's Pick:

"The Business of Being Born," a documentary film from executive producer Ricki Lake and director Abby Epstein

Compelled to explore the subject after the delivery of her first child, actress Ricki Lake recruits filmmaker Abby Epstein to question the way American women have babies.

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