

Doulas: Support for Women in Labor

Four years ago, Meghan Warner's best friend asked if she would be her "labor coach" during the birth of her first child. Ms. Warner agreed, not knowing quite what to expect. Her reaction surprised her.

"I fell in love with the experience," she remembers. "I told my friend, 'I could do this all the time!'" She subsequently discovered that by training to become a doula, she could indeed make the miracle of birth her vocation, and today, Ms. Warner is a volunteer mentor with Beverly Hospital's Doula Program.

A Greek term meaning "woman's servant," a doula is sometimes referred to as a birth assistant or labor coach. At Beverly Hospital, doula services are now offered to mothers-to-be, and a three-day long training program is held for women who are interested in becoming doulas.

"Doulas provide physical, emotional and informational support to help women cope with labor," explains women's health nurse practitioner Catherine Chalmers, RN. "They don't perform medical or nursing care, and they don't replace fathers, other family members or other professionals in the delivery room." Support might include massage, therapeutic touch, assistance with breathing and positioning, and encouragement throughout the labor process.



left to right
 Meghan Warner
 Doula Program
 Volunteer Mentor
 Kate Chalmers, RN
 Women's Health
 Nurse Practitioner
 Linda Cancellieri, RN
 Doula Program
 Coordinator
 Kate is holding new
 arrival Troy Edwards

"Having a doula available takes some of the pressure off fathers to be 'super coaches' for their wives," adds Ms. Warner. "Instead of trying to remember all the skills they were taught during their childbirth education classes, fathers can focus on their partners and let the doula take care of the details." Doulas can also provide stability. "If a woman is in labor through a shift change at the hospital, she may deal with several different nurses before she delivers," explains Ms. Warner. "Having a doula there can be comforting throughout these transitions."

Any woman can pursue doula training, regardless of her background, and the reasons women choose to become doulas are many and varied, according to Ms. Chalmers. "One of our students was a former nurse whose own daughter had just given birth. She was so moved by the experience, she decided that she wanted to help other women with their labor and deliveries. Another woman who had given birth as a teenager said that she wanted to help other teen mothers by providing them with labor support."

If you are an expectant mother and would like to learn more about doula services at Beverly Hospital, or if you would like to learn more about the next Doula Training Program planned for Spring 2002, please call (978) 922-3000, ext. 2206 or e-mail lcancellieri@nhs-healthlink.org.

What Does a Midwife Do?

Since its founding in 1980, the North Shore Birth Center on the campus of Beverly Hospital has been the birthplace of more than 5,000 babies, delivered by the Birth Center's six nurse-midwives. But what many women don't realize is that the Center is also available for routine gynecologic care, including family planning, pre-conception planning, and menopausal care.



Linda Anne L'Abbe, RN, CNM
 North Shore Birth Center Director

"Presently, about 70 percent of our practice is obstetrics and approximately 30 percent is gynecologic care," explains Linda Anne L'Abbe, RN, CNM, director of the North Shore Birth Center. In both instances, she adds, the nurse-midwife philosophy of care emphasizes "the whole person, rather than just the physical part of a problem."

"We ask about other factors that are going on in a woman's life that might be contributing to a health problem," says Ms. L'Abbe. "We would not only address the physical symptoms, but we would talk with her about her personal life, her family, her job, even her commute to work. We gather the patient's personal history, and spend time with her as a 'whole person.' We're trained to listen carefully."

Located in a cozy "cottage" across from Beverly Hospital, the North Shore Birth Center offers women a comfortable, home-like environment. Coupled with the unhurried personal attention that the nurse-midwives provide, this setting often proves ideal for a teenage girl's first gynecologic visit or for the perimenopausal woman who wants to explore alternative treatments for hot flashes and other troublesome symptoms.

"Among other things, midwifery focuses on alternative healing therapies, including herbology and homeopathy," explains Ms. L'Abbe. "We offer patients alternative remedies that have proven effective - we're not randomly brewing up batches of herbs!" she says, laughing.

Midwives are registered nurses who have completed a one- to two-year training program in obstetrics and gynecology. Students must then pass the board exams given by the American College of Nurse Midwives to become certified nurse-midwives.

To schedule an appointment or to learn more about the services offered at the North Shore Birth Center, please call (978) 927-7880.

