

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

Mothering the mother: Doulas help women with childbirth

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

By Tina Calabro

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of mothers-to-be have arranged for a doula to be present during labor and delivery. The centuries-old role of doula -- a knowledgeable, older woman who tends to a mother during childbirth -- has become a contemporary sight in hospital obstetric units. Recent national surveys report that doulas participate in about five out of every hundred births, and that number is growing.

Women report great satisfaction with births attended by doulas, who provide a wide range of non-medical support, such as relaxation techniques, massage and words of encouragement. However, the cost of a birth doula -- locally about \$450-\$500, and rarely covered by insurance -- has meant that the service is obtained mainly by women with financial resources.

That reality is changing.

A number of health care and social service organizations across the nation -- including three in Pittsburgh and one in Erie -- have begun to offer "community-based" doulas at no cost to low-income women.

Many of the women served by community doulas have special circumstances -- teens giving birth for the first time, single mothers, women with disabilities. Many lack a natural support network, feel uncomfortable in medical settings and, in general, are at higher risk of having a negative birth experience.

The three Pittsburgh organizations that sponsor community doula programs -- The Birth Circle, Every Child Inc. and UPMC Health Plan -- place significant faith in the ability of doulas to enhance not only the birth event but the health of the infant.

It's well documented that doula-assisted births often result in shorter labors, fewer C-sections and forceps deliveries, and less medication. Those who track community doulas are discovering additional benefits, such as fewer premature births, greater commitment to breastfeeding, and healthier pregnancy behaviors.

The Birth Circle program -- available to patients at East Liberty Family Health Care Center and Metro Family Practice in Wilksburg -- began providing doulas three years ago. Over that time, the percentage of



Bob Donaldson, Post-Gazette

Charla Johnson, left, and her 2-month-old daughter, Khyiah, with UPMC Health Plan doula Courtney Sage. Ms. Johnson credits Ms. Sage with calming her worries about whether she would know how to take care of her baby.

low-birthweight babies (under 5.5 pounds) born to patients at the two practices was 7.3 percent, compared to 11.4 percent citywide. The incidence of premature birth (fewer than 37 weeks' gestation) was 7.2 percent, compared to 14.5 percent citywide and 11.6 percent nationally.

The groundswell of community doula activity in Pittsburgh has led to a breakthrough in insurance coverage. UPMC Health Plan, in conjunction with East Liberty Health Care Center and Magee-Womens Hospital, has just launched a pilot program at UPMC Braddock for women enrolled in the "UPMC for You" Medicaid program. UPMC Health Plan is one of the first insurers in the nation to cover doula services.

The emerging community doula movement highlights the newfound wisdom of doula support ("mothering the mother," it's often called) and the special women who choose to fulfill the role.

"We're high on doulas," says David Brewton, associate executive director of East Liberty Family Health Care Center.

Pittsburgh's community doula movement started to take shape when obstetrician Irene Frederick moved from Philadelphia to join the faculty of UPMC Shadyside Family Practice and the staff of East Liberty Family Health Care Center in 1998. Dr. Frederick had long been passionate about ensuring that all pregnant women have a positive birth experience.

Dr. Frederick and other professionals concerned about healthy pregnancies for low-income and minority women built a coalition called The Birth Circle. The program, whose mission is to provide an "integrated circle of care" for childbearing families in the East End, began in 2004 to train women in the community to serve as doulas.

Around the same time, Every Child Inc., an agency focused on strengthening families, began training doulas for women who have physical and other types of disabilities.

Dr. Frederick says that a poor birth experience can negatively influence mothering. "A good birth experience leads to better attachment to the child, who then has a better start. There's more breastfeeding, less incidence of postpartum depression. The family is strengthened. It's a process."

A community-based doula differs from a private-pay doula in a few ways. Both types attend to the mother's well-being during labor and delivery, and are available for support before and after the birth.

However, a community doula often becomes involved with her client earlier in the pregnancy and stays on for a period of time after the birth. The length and frequency of prenatal and postpartum assistance differs from program to program, but it's a given that community doulas become familiar with the person they are assisting, and are able to provide additional guidance as needed.

Making a difference

The realization among social service providers that community doulas could positively impact the health of the baby was a collective "aha" moment, says Hope Ruedy, director of Erie Homes for Children and Adults in Erie. The agency has run a doula program for women with mental health and other types of disabilities since 2000.

All doulas help their clients create a "birth plan" that details the support they want during labor and delivery. "Birth is a time of such openness -- physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually," explains Kathy McGrath, a certified doula who has trained many of Pittsburgh's community doulas. "There is great vulnerability, for harm and for good. A doula can help a woman feel more in control."

Doulas help women feel "empowered, rather than disempowered, talked down to, disrespected," says Ms. McGrath. Many of the clients of community doulas have not had good experiences in medical settings, she says. "Some have their armor out."

A doula keeps a woman in her comfort zone and serves as her advocate with the medical staff. Accurately or not, some patients feel that they are perceived negatively by healthcare professionals because of their race, class, age or disability.

Ms. McGrath recalls a birth planning session in which a woman told her, "When I get upset, I go to a place of rage." Knowing that the hospital could trigger that response, the woman said, "I don't want my baby to be born with that much anger in the room. I want my baby to be born with love in the room." To accomplish this, Ms. McGrath asked the medical staff to introduce themselves to the woman rather than remain anonymous, and to say "happy birthday" to the newborn. "It made a difference to her," said Ms. McGrath.

Most of the doulas in The Birth Circle program live in the same neighborhoods as their clients. This feature is also the cornerstone of the new community doula program based at UPMC Braddock. Impressed by The Birth Circle's successes, UPMC Health Plan collaborated with the group to design a community doula program for the Braddock service area.

The health plan's interest was also influenced by the doulas themselves, said Dr. Michael Culyba, vice president of medical affairs for UPMC Health Plan. "After meeting some of them, we realized that the doula was the right choice. We were impressed with their almost spiritual nature in making the birth the best it could be. It was a compelling factor."

The program based at UPMC Braddock offers doula assistance for about six prenatal and four postpartum visits, in addition to the labor and delivery. It's too early to tell if the doula program is changing pregnancy behaviors and birth outcomes, but "all of the data seems to be trending in a positive way," said Dr. Culyba.

Experienced mom

UPMC Health Plan doula Courtney Sage has a self-assured and serene manner. Although just 24 years old, the aptly named Ms. Sage brings a wealth of experience to her relationship with 17-year-old Charla Johnson of Swissvale and her 2-month-old daughter, Khiyah.

Ms. Sage herself became a single mother at the age of 20. The birth of her son, Sonadore (Italian for "little golden dreamer"), was supported by two women -- one a generation older and another her own age. "All my support came from my women friends, not from the medical establishment," she says.

Later, she set out to do the same for other women and trained to be a doula.

During her pregnancy, Ms. Johnson developed preeclampsia and pre-term labor, but carried the baby to her due date. She credits her doula with calming her worries about whether she would know how to take care of her baby.

"Courtney told me, 'It will all come to you,' " said a smiling Ms. Johnson, as she cuddled her daughter. "And it did."

Of the birth itself, she says, "It would have been very hard if she wasn't there."

Ms. Sage, who lives in the East End with her husband and son, praises UPMC Health Plan for choosing women from the community to serve as doulas. "Not all of us have the same experience, but we have many things in common. We know our way in and out of the system, we know where the resources are."

Women with disabilities

Pregnant women with disabilities benefit greatly from doulas, says Susan Davis, executive director of Every Child Inc., whose doula program focuses on this population. In some cases, family members may be unhappy about the woman's pregnancy, resulting in stressful interactions.

Doula program participant Tamika Sibley, 30, has had past difficulties with parenting. But her determination to do better is apparent as she coos with 5-month-old Ariana in their Monroeville townhouse and tells about her anticipation of being reunited with her 3-year-old daughter, Tiana.

Her doula, Ann Greider, says that Tamika has grown more self-confident during the months she has spent with her -- support that Ms. Sibley calls "the most I've ever had." Ms. Greider's involvement has included driving Ms. Sibley to doctors' offices as often as three times per week during the pregnancy for blood pressure checks, and taking a telephone to bed with her each night in case she "had to run."

Every Child Inc. wants to start working with women as early in their pregnancies as possible. Its doula program offers the longest term of service in this area -- from the beginning of the pregnancy until the infant's first birthday. The program also offers the widest array of services, including transportation and a parenting curriculum.

"We help with whatever the mother needs -- doctor appointments, childbirth education, understanding medications, literacy, communication skills, housing," says Ms. Davis. "We never say 'that's not what I do.'"

Foundations help

UPMC Health Plan's doula program for Medicaid patients in the Braddock area is an important step toward wider insurance coverage. For now, most community doula programs rely on foundation support. The Heinz Endowments have supported The Birth Circle since its beginning. The doula program at Every Child Inc. was launched with grants from the FISA Foundation and the Children's Trust Fund. Recently, the Birmingham Foundation funded a two-year expansion of the program to the southern parts of the city.

Dr. Frederick notes that the increased presence of doulas at Magee-Womens Hospital has led to major strides there. "People are starting to see the value of doula support."

Doula trainer Ms. McGrath speaks frequently to groups. She asks the women in the audience to raise their hands if they have had a birth experience that is memorable for how awful it was. She has found that no matter what the size the group -- whether it's 30 or 300 -- half of the women in the room raise their hands.

Ms. McGrath believes that all pregnant women deserve a birth experience that they can look back on with satisfaction, no matter what their income or life situation. "Doulas give mothers a voice. It says: 'What I say matters and I matter. Birth matters. And how a woman gives birth matters.'"

For information on Every Child Inc., see <http://www.everychildinc.org/>