**The role of a Doula in supporting women during the perinatal period.**

The concept of a ‘Doula’ was introduced to the UK from the USA in the 1990s. Approximately 700 members are registered with Doula UK but the actual number of Doulas is expected to be higher as this occupation is currently unregulated (Doula UK 2020).

The role of the contemporary Doula descends from an age-old tradition of experienced elders supporting women during childbirth (Meadow 2015). Presently, A Doula is a trained professional who is able to provide one-to-one emotional and informational support to the whole family throughout pregnancy, birth and the initial days post-delivery (Kozhimannil et al 2014). A Doula is not a medical professional and therefore does not replace midwifery or health visiting services.

Antenatally Doulas’ support women in considering the risks and benefits of maternity options (Eftekhary 2010). Doulas can provide support during labour and delivery by using techniques such as imagery, massage, acupressure and patterned breathing to reduce a woman's pain in addition to positioning advice to accelerate labour or aid foetal positioning (Papagni and Buckner 2006). They can also provide support and encouragement to minimise any anxieties whilst encouraging communication between the labouring woman and their partner (Papagni and Buckner 2006). Postnatally the support offered by a Doula can be tailored to the family’s needs however McComish and Visger(2009) incorporate this into domains of care including; facilitating maternal responsiveness; encouraging competence; development of a long-term relationship; mother-centred care; maternal education; infant feeding support; assisting to integrate the infant into the family; developmental care; and attachment.

A multitude of benefits regarding Doula support for both Mother and infant have been reported. In relation to childbirth these include reduced risk of caesarean, instrumental birth, use of an epidural, lower rates of labour induction, shorter labour in addition to increased satisfaction with the birth experience (Brigstocke (2014), Bohren et al (2017)). Postnatally Doula support has been related to increased initiation and successful establishment of breastfeeding, in addition to increased rates of ongoing breastfeeding at 6 weeks (Brigstocke 2014). Doula support has also been reported to enhance a women’s level of self-esteem, with lower rates of postnatal depression in addition to Mothers exhibiting improved interaction with their babies post-delivery and two months later (Landry et al 1998).

Conversely, a Doula can be expensive as this is ordinarily a private service not provided by NHS funding although it is recognised that some Doula’s undertake the role voluntarily. It is also important that women choosing this service are advised to review an individual Doula’s experience, training and insurance (Tommy’s 2019).

Overall, Health Visitors need to be aware that some Mother’s maybe receiving Doula support as there will need to be collaboration between these professions to ensure optimum care and support for families.

Bohren M, Hofmeyr G, Sakala C, Fukuzawa R, Cuthbert A (2017) Continuous support for women during childbirth. Cochrane Database of systematic reviews. [Online] Available; <https://www.cochrane.org/CD003766/PREG_continuous-support-women-during-childbirth>

Brigstocke S (2014)A survey of doula-supported births in 2013 in the UK. MIDIRS Midwifery Digest. 24(2): 157-160

Doula UK (2020) About Doula UK. [Online] Available; <https://doula.org.uk/about-doula-uk/>

Eftekhary S (2010) The life of a Canadian Doula; successes, confusion and conflict. Journal of obstetric and gynaecology Canada. 32(7) 642-649

Kozhimannil K, Attanasio L, Jou J, Joarnt L, Johnson P, Gjerdingen D (2014) Potential benefits of increased access to doula support during childbirth. American Journal of managed care. 20(8): e340-e352

Landry S, McGrath S, Kennel J (1998). The effect of doula support during labor on mother-infant interaction at 2 months. Pediatric Research. 43(4: Part II), 13A

Meadow S (2015) Defining the Doula’s role: fostering relational autonomy. Health Expectations. 18(6): 3057-3068

Papagni K, Buckner E (2006) Doula support and attitudes of intrapartum nurses: A qualitative study from the patients perspective. The Journal of Perinatal Education. 15(1): 11-18

Tommy’s (2019) What is a Doula. [Online] Available : <https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/labour-birth/labour-and-birth-faqs/what-doula>