DONA International (1992–) [1]

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In 1992, five maternal–infant health researchers founded Doulas of North America, later renamed DONA International to train certified birth attendants called doulas to provide care to pregnant women both before and after the birthing process. Annie Kennedy, John Kennell, Marshall Klaus, Phyllis Klaus, and Penny Simkin used the term doula, derived from the Greek word for woman servant, to describe a female birthing aide who provides non-medical emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women. Eventually renamed DONA International, the organization [7] has certified over 120,000 doulas as of 2017.

Though the organization [7] aims to provide a doula to everyone who wants one, there have been controversies surrounding the accessibility, affordability, and necessity of pregnant women using a doula before and after birth. DONA International is the largest doula-certifying program in the world and has created global awareness of the risks and benefits associated with using a doula during the birthing process.

Kennedy, Kennell, Simkin, Klaus, and Klaus founded Doulas of North America in 1992 to create a systematic means of licensing non-medical birthing aides called doulas. DONA International’s mission is to promote high quality birth and postpartum support by setting the standard for the doula profession through evidence-based training and certification for doulas of diverse backgrounds. Doulas are trained to provide emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women through non-medical interventions such as aromatherapy, acupressure, and massage and meditation techniques. Before DONA International, there were no known professional affiliations for non-medical birthing aides in the United States. While some pregnant women in labor also use midwives, midwives differ from doulas in that midwives are typically trained medical professionals who specialize in pregnancy [8] and labor.

Each of the cofounders specialized in an aspect of maternal–infant health and their individual specialties impacted the organization’s development and mission. In the 1960s, physicians Klaus and Kennell worked together at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio conducting research on maternal–infant bonding. Maternal-infant bonding is the study of the physical, chemical, and emotional dynamics shared by a pregnant woman and her infant. Researchers who studied maternal-infant bonding examined the relationships between mothers and their infants to understand the infant’s development and socialization. Klaus and Kennell discovered that the first three to five days following birth is a critical time for women who recently gave birth to create important bonds with their infants. Klaus and Kennell also discovered that a pregnant woman’s labor and delivery experience was positively impacted by the presence of another woman providing continuous emotional support. Klaus and Kennell founded DONA International alongside Klaus’s wife, Phyllis, who was a social worker. Also joining the project was Kennedy, a trained midwife, and Simkin, a physical therapist.

In the 1980s, Klaus and Kennell came together with Kennedy, Klaus, and Simkin to begin their discussions on the importance of labor support and giving women a voice in their birthing outcomes. In 1989, breastfeeding and lactation researcher Dana Raphael used the term doula to describe the role of non-medical support aids in assisting pregnant women during labor. In a study on how different mammals gave birth and cared for their offspring, the founders of DONA International used the word doula to describe women whose presence during childbirth positively affected the pregnant woman and infant.

In 1992, as stated by the founders, the purpose of Doulas of North America was to train and certify doulas in providing emotional and physical support for pregnant women before, during, and after labor. In addition, the founders aimed to provide training programs for doulas to help pregnant women experience a more satisfying and empowering birthing experience. A study on how different mammals gave birth and cared for their offspring provided the impetus for the founders to develop a certification program to help doulas provide care to pregnant women both before and after their births.

In 1992, Klaus and Kennell, with the support of DONA International, documented the benefits of using a doula during labor and delivery. In a study of women using doulas in Alabama, over 44 percent of women who recently gave birth indicated a hostile relationship between their doulas and medical staff. The researchers found that laboring women assisted with doulas throughout their pregnancies were four times less likely to have an infant with low birth weight, and were significantly more successful at initiating breastfeeding in the first twelve months following birth. Because of these findings and those found by Klaus and Klausoun the benefit of breastfeeding during the first few postpartum days, DONA International created an online breastfeeding course to better prepare doulas to assist women who recently gave birth in initiating breastfeeding.

The five original founders had a large influence in DONA International’s development as the first doula-certification organization [7]. Simkin served as the original president of the organization [7], and contributed to the guidelines and certification standards that the organization [7] produced. The founders conducted research on new mothers and found that the three-to-four-day period following birth was a crucial time for women who recently gave birth to form attachments to their infants. The founders implemented these findings in the organization’s standards on the importance of immediate skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding. Even after many of the original five founders stepped down, they continued to collaborate on research. In 2012, Klaus, Klaus, and Kennell published the book, The Doula Book: How a Trained Labor Companion Can Help You Have a Shorter, Easier, and Healthier Birth, a guide on emotional and physical support during labor. DONA International recommends that all doulas pursuing certification read the book.

During the 2000s, leadership and organization [7] at DONA International changed as it became an international organization. The management and structure of the organization [7] evolved to encompass state-level affiliations, with a state director for each state in the United States and national directors for countries outside of North America. There is also a board of directors that are voted into office every year by members of DONA International. Today, the organization’s mission is to promote high quality birth and postpartum support by setting the standard for the doula profession through evidence-based training and certification for doulas of diverse backgrounds. Doulas are trained to provide emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women through non-medical interventions such as aromatherapy, acupressure, and massage and meditation techniques.

Throughout DONA International, there were no known professional affiliations for non-medical birthing aides in the United States. While some pregnant women in labor also use midwives, midwives differ from doulas in that midwives are typically trained medical professionals who specialize in pregnancy [8] and labor. DONA International’s mission is to promote high quality birth and postpartum support by setting the standard for the doula profession through evidence-based training and certification for doulas of diverse backgrounds. Doulas are trained to provide emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women through non-medical interventions such as aromatherapy, acupressure, and massage and meditation techniques.

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As of 2017, DONA International continues to certify doulas around the world. DONA International continues to conduct research regarding the role of doulas in the birthing process, and contributed to the World Health Organization’s Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative by demonstrating the benefits of lactation consultants and birthing aides.

Sources

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- Natural childbirth
- Labor (Obstetrics)
- Childbirth at home
- Active childbirth
- Doulas
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Topic
- Organizations

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