DONA International (1992– )

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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, to describe a female birthing aide who provides non-medical emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women. Eventually renamed DONA International, the organization has certified over 12,000 doulas as of 2017. Though the organization aims to provide continuous support for women during labor, research on the efficacy of doula care has been mixed. Some studies have shown that doulas can reduce the risk of maternal and infant complications, while others have found no significant differences in outcomes. DONA International’s doula training program is largely based on the research done by the original founders, who found that women experienced more positive births with the aid of a doula. A 2013 article published in the “Journal of Perinatal Education” summarized over ten studies performed in the 2000s that indicated doulas provided positive support to laboring women. Those researchers found that laboring women assisted by 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 hours following birth. The researchers also found that those doulas who undertook their training in breastfeeding during the last few postpartum days were significantly more successful in establishing breastfeeding. DONA International created an optional 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 program. Simkin served as the original president of the organization, and contributed to the doula manuals and certification standards that the organization produced. The Klauses 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 those 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 Simkin published the book “The Doula Book: How a Trained Labor Assistant 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 pursue certification read the book.

During the 2000s, leadership and structure evolved to encompass state-level affiliations, with a state chapter 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 the organization. In 2005, the board added the position of president to encompass the leadership positions of president, director of education, intercultural director, and membership director. In addition to the United States and Canada, there is leadership present in Australia, Finland, Greece, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Slovenia, and New Zealand. As of 2018, DONA International outsources their general management and operations activities to a consulting company called Bostrom headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. Through Bostrom, DONA International employs an executive director, certification and education manager, and a membership manager, along with a full staff of employees.

Throughout the 2000s, DONA International continued to claim that doulas were beneficial to a pregnant woman’s birthing process. However, some women and medical professionals voiced concerns about a doula’s overall involvement in labor and delivery. In a 2006 study of women using doulas in Alabama, over 44 percent of women who recently gave birth indicated a hostile relationship between their doulas and hospital staff. According to the New York Times article, “And the Doula Makes Four,” many physicians and nurses agree that doulas have created conflict between healthcare professionals and pregnant women. The physicians interviewed in that article, encountered doulas who overstated their boundaries and advised pregnant women to go against medical advice. The physicians also found that some doulas encouraged their pregnant patients to use medical or herbal remedies instead of waiting for a cesarean section during labor, even when those options were unlikely to cause harm to the pregnant woman, according to the physicians. Because of those reasons, the physicians interviewed in that article advised pregnant women against the use of a doula.

Though DONA makes it clear that it’s doulas are trained to be non-medical support aids, instances of conflict between health professionals and doulas have caused some to believe that doulas can interfere with the provision of medical care. Despite the existence of training and certification programs through organizations like DONA International, anyone can claim to be a doula regardless of whether they have received training. DONA International continues to indicate that doulas do not receive medical training and they should not be involved in any critical medical decisions.

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 aids.

Sources
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