DONA International (1992–) [1]

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DONA International is an organization that trains and certifies doulas, non-medical birth companions who provide emotional and physical support to pregnant women during labor. DONA International was founded in 1992 by five maternal-infant health researchers to provide a systematic means of licensing non-medical birthing aides called doulas. DONA International continues to certify doulas around the world and has contributed to the World Health Organization's recommendations on the roles of doulas in the birthing process.

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. Arnie Kennedy, John Kennell, Marshall Klaus, Phyllis Klaus, and Penny Simkin were the term doula, derived from the Greek word for woman servant, to describe a female birth attendant who provides non-medical emotional and physical support to laboring pregnant women. Initially, DONA International certified doulas as of 1992. Though the organization aims to provide childbirth and postpartum support, DONA International's role is to certify doulas around the world and provide education and resources to the doula community.

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. Kennell and Klaus's work led to the concept of postpartum bonding and the development of the postpartum doula. Simkin and Kennedy, the third of five doulas following birth, is a critical time for women who recently gave birth to create important bonds with their infants. Klaus and Kennel 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 1990s, Klaus and Kennell joined Kennedy, Klaus, and Simkin to begin discussing their findings that women experience better birthing outcomes with the support of a non-medical female birth attendant. Their findings led the researchers to conclude that birthing aids needed training and certification. The group decided to use the word doula to identify the women who supported laboring pregnant women. Doula is derived from a Greek word meaning servant woman. The group decided to use the word doula before the term midwife and the term labor was used to describe women whose presence during childbirth positively affected the pregnant woman and infant.

In 1992, as stated by the founders, the purpose of DONA International was to train and certify doulas in providing emotional and physical support for pregnant women before, during, and after labor as well as to provide certificates for doulas in Canada and the United States. The organization, founded in 2001, originally named the Doulas of North America was renamed DONA International in 2004 after the organization developed an international presence outside of North America. As the organization grew, its purpose evolved to encompass specialized training for labor and delivery doulas, and postpartum doulas.

Donna's role is to assist the pregnant women and provide physical support during 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. The study 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 hours following birth. Because of those conclusions and those found by Klaus and Klaus and the benefit of breastfeeding during the first few postpartum days, 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 organization. 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 Kennedy 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 doula certification read the book.

During the 2000s, leadership and organization at DONA International changed as it became an international agency. The management and structure of the organization 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. The current president of DONA International is Barbara L. Conroy, president-elect, and 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's current 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 support 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, and as a result, some hospitals have prohibited the presence of doulas. According to the physicians interviewed in that article, they encountered doulas who overstepped their boundaries and advised women whose presence during childbirth positively affected the pregnant woman and infant.

Though DONA makes it clear that its 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 should not be involved in any medical critical 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 recommendations on the roles of doulas in the birthing process.

Sources

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Though the organization 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.


15. Source 2

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