"Effects of Social Support During Parturition on Maternal and Infant Morbidity” (1986), by Marshall Klaus, John Kennell, Steven Robertson, and Roberto Sosa [1]


In 1986, researchers Marshall Klaus, John Kennell, Steven Robertson, and Roberto Sosa in the United States published “Effects of Social Support During Parturition on Maternal and Infant Morbidity,” hereafter “Effects of Social Support...” in the British Medical Journal. In that article, the authors describe their efforts to determine if the presence of a supportive companion during a pregnant woman’s labor, or parturition helped to either shorten her labor or reduce negative health outcomes for both mother and infant, also called morbidity. After conducting the study in Guatemala, the researchers concluded that the presence of a supportive labor companion, whom they call doula, resulted in shortened duration of labor for pregnant women and reduced health risks during and after childbirth.

Prior to the 1986 publication of “Effects of Social Support...” physicians Klaus and Kennell worked together to examine maternal-infant bonding at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Maternal-infant bonding is the process of the chemical and emotional bonds forged between the mother and her infant. Scientists Robertson and Sosa both worked as clinical researchers affiliated with different children’s hospitals in the United States. The four researchers all studied bonding between mothers and their infants, and began publishing their findings together in the late 1970s on variables affecting maternal-infant bonding.

In 1980, during a study on maternal-infant bonding, Klaus, Kennell, Robertson, and Sosa serendipitously discovered that pregnant women experienced shortened durations of labor when a female research assistant accompanied them throughout the childbirth process. In the research, the female research assistant did not intend to be present for emotional support. However, throughout the process, she talked with and inadvertently comforted the pregnant women in the study. As a result, the researchers observed the pregnant women’s labor durations shorten from an average of 19.3 hours without companionship to an average of 8.7 hours with the presence of the female companion. The authors later called such supportive female companions doulas, which is a word derived from the Greek language that means woman servant. Those observations led the researchers to perform the 1986 study documented in “Effects of Social Support...” to determine the effects of doulas on pregnant women’s labor durations and outcomes.

The authors divide “Effects of Social Support...” into four sections, including an introduction, methods, results, and discussion. In the introduction, the authors discuss the need to test new techniques to improve the birthing process for both mothers and their infants. The authors detail the overall experimental setup of the research study in the methods section. In the results section, they describe the findings, which include a reduction in duration of labor and birth-related complications in mother and infant within the experimental group that received care from a doula. Finally, the authors discuss their overall findings and possible applications of those findings to other studies.

In the introduction, the authors of “Effects of Social Support...” detail the need for new techniques to aid in the birthing process and the overall purpose of their study. As the four researchers indicate, their purpose was to determine the effects of companionship on a pregnant woman’s labor duration and risk of complications. They emphasize that, with the development of new birthing technologies at the time, such as the use of synthetic hormones to facilitate a woman’s birthing process, scientists should be open to new strategies to help women during pregnancy and delivery. The authors also cite the use of doulas during labor as another such strategy.

The authors summarize their methods in the next section of “Effects of Social Support...” They explain that they assessed 465 full-term pregnant women in early labor at the Social Security Hospital in Guatemala. The researchers did not provide a time frame or length during which they conducted the study. However, they did mention that the hospital where they conducted the study had over fifty infant deliveries per day. The authors treated the control group of pregnant women with regular hospital protocol. At that hospital, hospital protocol dictated that women in early labor be kept in a large waiting room together with no family members present. Once those women moved into active labor, hospital staff would bring them into another group delivery room, again with no family members permitted per hospital policy. As the authors explained, one of three nonmedical female doulas accompanied each of the women in the experimental group at the start of their participation in the study through the entire childbirth process. The doulas provided support to the laboring women with comfort techniques such as back rubs, hand-
Sources


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