

# Doulas can help birthing mothers ease pain

By IRENE GENTLE  
The Champion

**H**alton women now have an added choice when it comes to childbirth.

Thanks to the expansion of a Toronto-based non-profit organization, Doulas have arrived in the region.

They are coming equipped with a birth bag bursting with aromatherapy oils, reflexology knowledge, a soothing manner and reams of information.

Anything, in other words, to make the birth experience a smooth and natural one for expectant moms.

Put simply, a Doula is a woman experienced with childbirth who is there exclusively for the emotional and physical comfort of the mother and family.

The idea is to make the experience as natural as possible by following the mother's own instincts, said Kim Etherington, a Doula with Choices Childbirth Education and Doula Services (CCEDS).

"We want to watch her and follow her lead," she said.

"The woman is the guide down the path. And we are there to clear the path for her."

CCEDS has been offering Doula services since 1995 in the Toronto area.

## Services now include Halton

Just recently they have expanded their services to include Halton and Peel.

But Doulas are not a new phenomenon, said Ms Etherington.

"They have been around since women have been having babies," she said. And their influence is growing.

In 1992, only 200 Doulas were registered with the certification organization Doulas of North America.

Today, there are close to 3,000.

Doula is a Greek word meaning head female servant, since that was who traditionally took care of the mother during a birth.

There is no clinical component to the Doula's role. She is not trained as a doctor or a midwife.

But she plays an often neglected role of ensuring the comfort and well-being of the mother and family.

The idea is to give mothers back choice and control.

And that often means following her gut instincts, said Ms Etherington.

"We really believe in instinctual birth. We don't believe in a technique," she said. "That would be making an assumption that all women birth the same way."

And with a Doula present, women are not expected to simply lie down for labour if they don't want to.

That can actually increase pain, leading to more requests for epidurals than may actually be necessary, said Ms Etherington.

"We really encourage women to maintain their mobility during labor," she said. "When they are in bed, lying on their backs, it absolutely increases the pain."

Not that CCEDS are against epidurals or any other kind of birthing tool.

Instead they are all for giving mothers enough information to make an educated choice.

That means getting together to devise a birthing wish-list before labor begins.

A Doula can't make that wish list come true, warned Ms Etherington. But she can at least use it as a guideline to help the mother feel more relaxed.

"It gives us something to shoot for," she said.

Ms Etherington has had two children, both born after more than 40 hours of labour.

But the first birth left her shaken and

vulnerable to feelings of post-partum depression.

That's because a traumatic birth experience can lead to feelings of inadequacy in the mother, said Ms Etherington.

As a Doula, she specializes in supporting women who have undergone C-sections but are aiming for a vaginal birth next.

"I think if a woman has a cesarean section and doubts the necessity of it, she doubts her ability to be a good mother. She

doubts her ability to make good choices," said Ms Etherington. "But a woman who gives birth of her own power, there is less doubt."

## Cascade effect

Not knowing all the options can lead to what Ms Etherington refers to as the cascade effect.

That happens when one wrong decision leads to a waterfall of others.

In Ms Etherington's case, the wrong decision was being admitted to the hospital in the very early stages of labour with her first child.

So when her labour seemed to stall, interventions such as breaking her water were undertaken.

That led to pain, and an epidural to ease it.

But the epidural froze labour in its  
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