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# Intrapartum and Postpartum Outcomes Associated with the Use of Doulas



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**Jenna B. Constant<sup>1</sup>, Breanna J. Geyer<sup>1</sup>, Samuel P. Abraham<sup>2\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Bethel University School of Nursing at Grace College Campus, Winona Lake, Indiana, USA*

<sup>2\*</sup>*Associate Professor of Nursing, Bethel University School of Nursing, Mishawaka, Indiana, USA*

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The intrapartum and postpartum period can be a frightening time for any woman. There are new challenges that the woman has never experienced before, that may leave the woman feeling lost, confused, and anxious about what is to come. Reportedly, doulas are trained professionals who provide physical, emotional, and educational support to women during the prenatal, intrapartum, and postpartum periods. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to determine the outcomes and benefits of having a doula present during pregnancy, labor, and delivery. **Method:** The method used was a review of the current literature. The central research question was: In intrapartum/postpartum women (P), how does the use of doula services (I) affect birthing experience and outcomes/postpartum recovery(O) versus those without doula support (C) during pregnancy and postpartum recovery (T)? **Findings:** After a review of the literature, three themes were identified. Doula supports improved breastfeeding initiation and maintenance, decreased postpartum depression and anxiety, and improved maternal support. **Conclusion:** Outcomes associated with doula support and care during the intrapartum and postpartum periods are so significant that they should be seen as an important member of the healthcare team.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Childbirth and the postpartum period can be times of great joy due to the new life that is entering the world. It is a time of immense adjustment for any family. Labor and delivery alone present many challenges for the woman and family to conquer, especially if they have never experienced it before. It can be even scarier to feel completely alone without support during this time.

Doulas are trained professionals who provide physical, emotional, and educational support to women during the prenatal, intrapartum, and postpartum periods [1]. Doulas provide coaching through the birthing process, ensuring adequate explanation before medical procedures [2]. Another key component of doula care is advocacy [3]. Doulas promote the pregnant woman's right to decision-making before, during, and after birth. They ensure appropriate communication between members of the medical team.

Kett et al. [2] also suggested that doulas may also provide support in the immediate postpartum period by providing lactation support. They work to educate women and offer their expertise in the care of an infant [4]. Doulas may provide home visits to postpartum women to support them emotionally and physically [2].

Community-based doulas may work in a wide variety of settings. For example, doulas may work for non-profits, or hospital-based programs, or may even be self-employed [2]. Doulas in the community often help to support the medically underserved [5]. Doulas may be able to better address the structural racism some patients may face. They can provide additional resources that set the clients up for success, such as access to healthy foods, mental health support, or housing referrals.

The use of doulas has been shown to improve birthing outcomes and decrease complications. Women who use doulas are more likely to have decreased maternal stress, lower rates of cesarean sections, and lower rates of preterm births [2]. The presence of doula advocacy when there is impaired informed consent, verbal abuse, or coercion by the healthcare team has been observed.

## Background

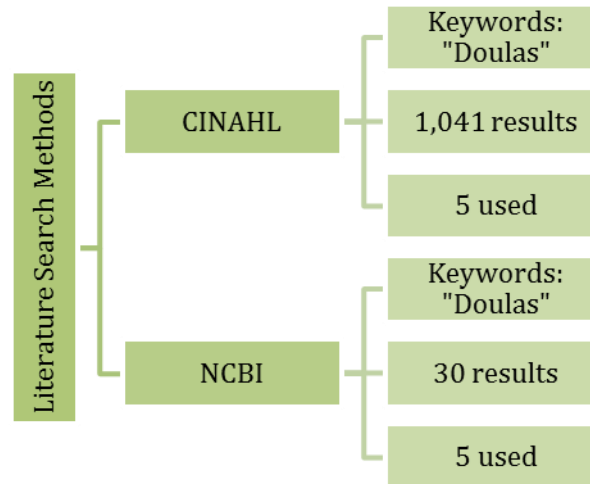
Although several studies have highlighted the benefits of a doula, there is still limited access to doula care. In 2021, several states were reevaluating policies regarding doula reimbursement through Medicaid. Each policy, however, reimburses a different amount [2]. This is why it is crucial for further research on the benefits of doula care. Increased support of doula care may help to enact new policies that expand doula access to more of the population.

The purpose of this study was to analyze current data regarding the use of doulas in the intrapartum and postpartum period. Effort was made to find relevant evidence that outlines how doula care not only has an impact on the labor process but also on the mother's emotional state and overall well-being. The question proposed was: In intrapartum/postpartum women, how does the use of doula services affect birthing experience and outcomes/postpartum recovery versus those without doula support during pregnancy/postpartum recovery?

## 2. METHOD

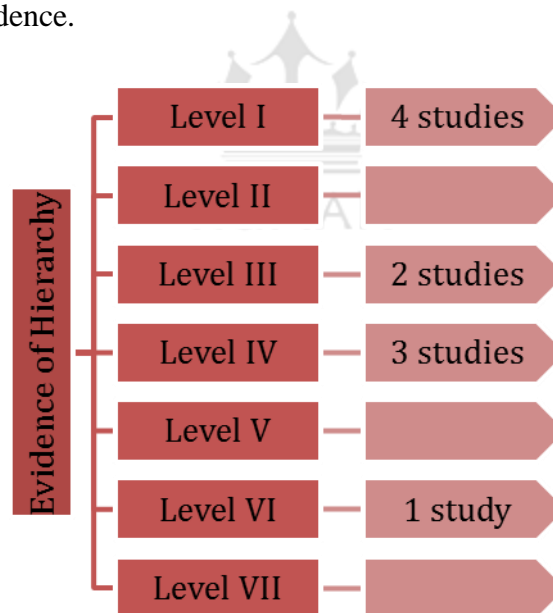
The research method used was a review of the literature regarding doulas. The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) were databases used for this review. The keywords used to locate studies included doulas, doulas and birthing outcomes, doula support, doula care, doula and labor, doula and postpartum, and doula and breastfeeding.

Using the phrase “doula,” CINAHL retrieved 1,041 studies. After applying filters to exclude studies before 2020, non-academic journals, and studies without access to full text, 75 remained and 5 were used. NCBI retrieved 330 studies. After applying the same filters, 142 studies remained and 5 were used. Morse studies were included later. Studies included in the review collected data through systematic analysis, nonexperimental studies, cohort studies, integrative review, interviews, and scoping review (see Figure 1).



**Figure No. 1: Databases and Search Results for Studies of Doula Support**

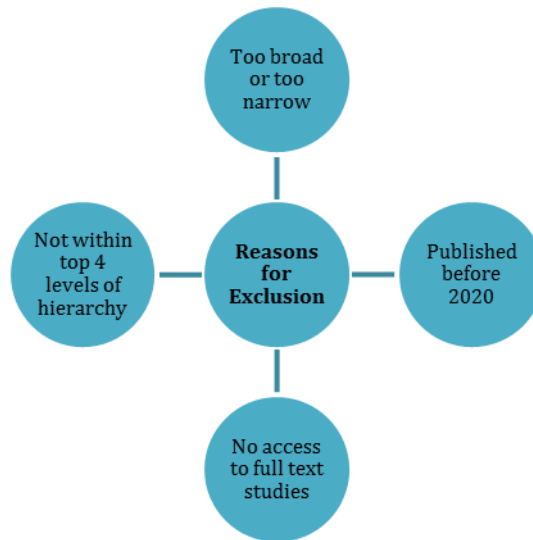
Figure 2 displays the evidence of the hierarchy used in this review [6]. Level one reflects the highest level of evidence and level seven is the lowest. An attempt was made to include studies in the top four tiers of evidence.



**Figure No. 2: Nursing Evidence Hierarchy for Studies of Doula Support**

Ten studies were initially chosen for this review. Research is limited due to the impaired access to doula care and weak policies on supporting individuals during labor. Studies included focused on the outcomes associated with the use of doulas during the intrapartum and postpartum periods. Studies were excluded for being too broad or too narrow, published before 2020, not

being within the top four levels of the evidence hierarchy, or the database not offering access to the full text (see Figure 3).



**Figure No. 3: Exclusion Criteria in Searching Studies for Doula Support**

Key terms used throughout the review include intrapartum and postpartum. Intrapartum relates to the period during the birthing process, also known as labor or delivery [7]. Intrapartum may also be exchanged with the term labor and delivery. Postpartum refers to the first six weeks after birth. Murray et al. [7] affirmed that during the postpartum period, many physiologic and psychosocial changes occur.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

After a review of the current literature, three themes emerged. Each of the themes demonstrates the positive birthing outcomes associated with doula care in the intrapartum and postpartum periods. Doula care was shown to improve breastfeeding initiation and maintenance, decrease the incidence of postpartum anxiety or depression, and improve maternal support.

#### **Improved Breastfeeding Initiation and Maintenance**

One area of concern for many pregnant mothers is when, how, or why to breastfeed. Many new moms enter labor and hope to breastfeed but may not have the resources to even initiate breastfeeding. One of the themes identified in almost half of the studies was the role of doulas in

breastfeeding. Doulas were identified to play a role in the prenatal, intrapartum, and postpartum stages [3].

Prenatally, doulas provided educational and informational support regarding intrapartum or immediate postpartum breastfeeding. This counseling may help the woman feel more comfortable in breastfeeding initiation postpartum. Acquaye and Spatz [8] stated that, regardless of a doula's additional lactation training, women with doula support showed significantly higher breastfeeding initiation rates. Sobczak et al. [4] determined that doula support resulted in postpartum women being more likely to initiate breastfeeding.

Postpartum, women were more likely to continue breastfeeding, also known as breastfeeding maintenance [9]. Irons et al. [10] noted that doulas offer help during the postpartum period to support breastfeeding and bonding. Acquaye and Spatz [8] noted that doulas may also provide in-home breastfeeding counseling to better support the breastfeeding woman.

### **Decreased Incidence of Postpartum Anxiety and Depression**

New changes and severe hormone shifts can often poorly affect a mother's psyche during pregnancy and postpartum. It is not uncommon for new moms to get 'baby blues' or even suffer from postpartum depression or anxiety. The review indicates doula support helped to decrease the incidence of anxiety and depression in intrapartum and postpartum women.

Falconi et al. [11] hypothesize that doula engagement and support beyond childbirth may contribute to lower rates of postpartum anxiety or depression. Other studies indicated that moms with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who have doula support may have decreased anxiety [4]. Doula support, especially in mothers without a support system, has been shown to promote maternal well-being. In Iranian postpartum women, Mortazavi and Mehrabadi [12] highlighted modifiable factors for reducing fear of childbirth and increasing normal vaginal birth. They concluded, in designing programs to increase the rate of normal vaginal birth, factors such as limiting induced labor and encouraging women to recruit a doula to help them during labor should be considered [12]. Irons et al. [10] stated that those without this one-on-one support often reported facing higher rates of postpartum depression. Doula support during this period has

been shown to decrease depression and anxiety rates, especially in at-risk women [10]. Doula psychosocial support during this time may be the cause of these improved outcomes [13].

### **Improved Maternal Support**

Preparing for pregnancy and birth can be a stressful time for women. Sobczak et al. [4] illuminated that doulas help to provide support to women during the intrapartum and postpartum periods. Because of the nature of the job, doulas can build trusting relationships with their patients which promotes comfort and decreases fear.

Doulas can be useful in reducing labor times and decreasing the incidence of c-sections [10]. They have been shown to promote confidence and help with the emotional aspects of labor and delivery. Doulas provide support by promoting self-esteem for the mother [9].

Another way that doulas can support their patients is by advocating for them. Doulas are trained professionals who can answer questions for the patient regarding their care [4]. This helps to alleviate fear and anxiety related to the intrapartum and postpartum period. The emotional support provided by the doula helps to promote a more positive birthing experience [10]. Greater efforts to integrate support persons for specific roles, including decision-making support, bridging communication, and advocacy, are needed to meet women's needs for support in maternity care [14]. Liu et al. [15] stated that a high satisfaction level was found when there was midwife-led prenatal counseling and the presence of doula and family members.

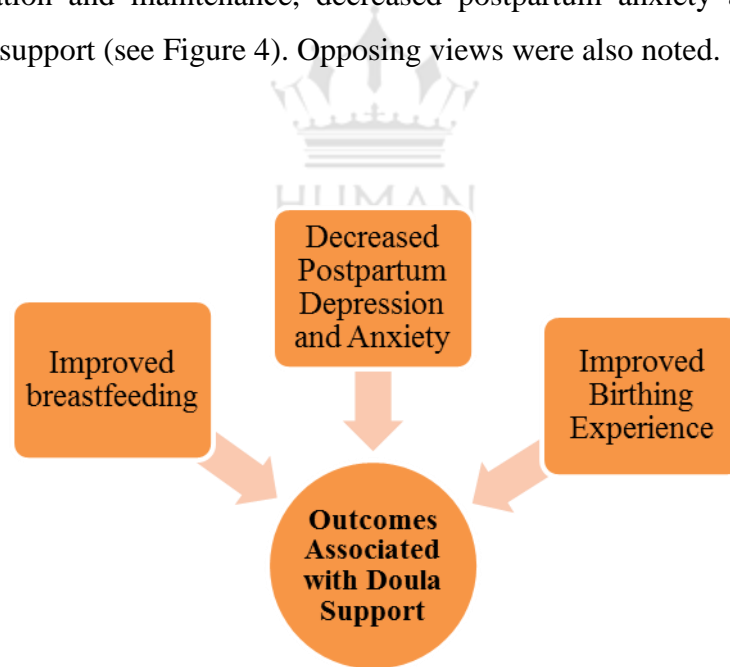
### **Opposing Views**

Doulas face challenges accessing physical resources and struggle to provide their model of care considering routine hospital interventions and procedures [16]. The medical model of birth is resistant to even minor modifications or perspectives that view birth holistically rather than solely dependent on medical intervention [16]. In a scoping review, de Carvalho Leite et al. [17] found that most Canadian care providers do not express positive attitudes towards doulas. Generally, laboring and postpartum women expressed that having a doula was or would be valuable. Opinions of other professionals towards doulas varied according to discipline, with midwives being the most approving.

Kukura [18] discusses the important role doulas play in promoting good perinatal health outcomes and considers why many hospitals and healthcare providers perceive doulas as a threat rather than as a source of value in the delivery room, which results in approaches to restrict doulas through formal and informal mechanisms. Hostility to doulas and restrictions on birth support reflect central qualities of mainstream perinatal care, such as liability-driven decision-making, nonadherence to evidence-based medicine, medical authoritarianism, and fear, all of which interfere with efforts to improve health outcomes amid a maternal health crisis that disproportionately burdens minorities [18].

### Summary of Results

Multiple research studies were used to assess the effects of doula support for intrapartum and postpartum women. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of doula support on the birthing experience and postpartum period. Three common themes were identified: increased breastfeeding initiation and maintenance, decreased postpartum anxiety and depression, and improved maternal support (see Figure 4). Opposing views were also noted.



**Figure No. 4: Intrapartum and Postpartum Outcomes Associated with the Use of Doulas**



#### 4. DISCUSSION

This current literature review focuses on answering the question: In intrapartum/postpartum women, how does the use of doula services affect birthing experience and outcomes/postpartum recovery versus those without doula support during pregnancy and postpartum recovery? Doulas offer services to women in a sensitive and intimate time of their lives. Pregnancy, labor, delivery, and the postpartum period may be a difficult time for women to go through. This study highlights the value of having doulas as a part of intrapartum and postpartum care.

These studies explained outcomes associated with doula support and care during the intrapartum and postpartum periods. Findings reflected positive intrapartum and postpartum outcomes associated with the use of doulas. Wójcik-Brylska et al. [19] advocated the benefits of doulas being involved with intrapartum and postpartum care. Doulas have been shown to decrease postpartum depression and anxiety [11].

Another theme was breastfeeding initiation and maintenance have increased because of the help of doulas [9]. This helps to promote bonding after birth and adds to the positive birthing experience for the mother. Breastfeeding can be difficult for mothers to navigate on their own, so having a doula can make this process easier [10].

Doulas help the mother get through the postpartum period by promoting rest, support, and emotional processing [3]. This theme was supported by other studies as well. Irons et al. [10] defended that doulas are useful for emotional support and improved family dynamics. These help the mother to have a positive intrapartum and postpartum experience. Marudo et al. [20] reported, that many health centers serve as large public safety-net hospitals, and having more health center-affiliated doula programs nationwide could be a positive step in bridging disparities and improving maternal and child health.

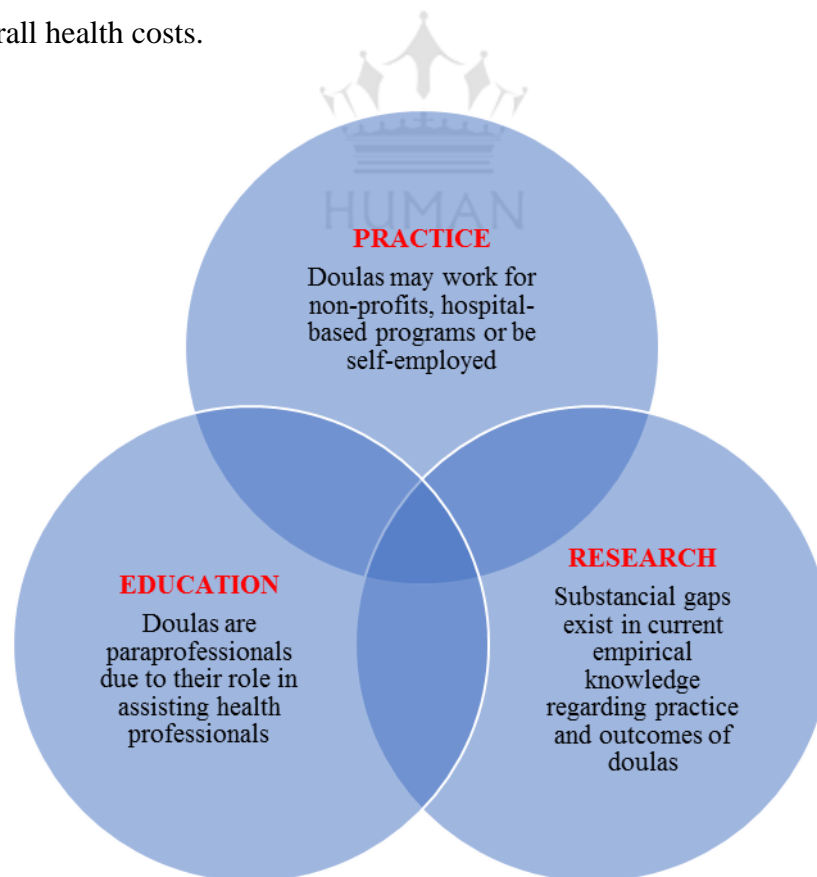
Despite these positive outcomes, the challenges faced by doulas are noted. Payment for services is unclear. Not all healthcare providers support them. Sometimes they are looked upon as a threat. Restrictions of doulas through formal and informal avenues have been attempted.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Study

The consensus is that doulas have a positive influence on the intrapartum and postpartum periods for women and their families. Many of the studies not used in this literature review were focused on very specific groups of people that were not necessarily relevant. Most of the studies that resulted from the searches were of foreign language and not accessible for this literature review.

## Recommendations

The use of doulas has a direct correlation to positive outcomes for intrapartum and postpartum women. Substantial gaps exist in current empirical knowledge regarding outcomes of doula support (see Figure 5). Future research would be beneficial to promoting the use of doulas for more women who are pregnant and postpartum. Continued research could give more insight into the positive outcomes associated with doula care. Further evidence-based research may result in changes to healthcare policies to make doula care more affordable and accessible. This may help to decrease overall health costs.



**Figure No. 5: Application of Evidence-Based Practice for Doula Support**

Doulas should be considered a more valuable profession for intrapartum and postpartum women. They can visit women in their homes and can provide culturally sensitive care. Education should be initiated for hospital staff members to know that doulas are a beneficial resource for women who are pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding. Doulas are trained professionals who provide care to women in an important area of life. Obstetric offices and hospital staff should consider giving women information on the different resources available including doulas.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although childbirth can be an amazing experience, it can also pose some challenges for the woman and family involved. As professionals in this area of care, doulas can provide emotional, physical, and spiritual support during the intrapartum and postpartum period. Doulas are useful in promoting breastfeeding initiation and maintenance as well as decreasing the risk of postpartum depression and anxiety. Doulas help to improve maternal support, which promotes overall better patient outcomes. Doulas are available to women in the hospital setting and the community setting. They provide care to women that build confidence and self-esteem. They advocate for their patients and help by answering questions related to their care. Doulas have the potential to positively impact labor and delivery and postpartum women.

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	<p><b>Jenna B. Constant</b> <i>Bethel University School of Nursing, Grace Campus, Winona Lake, Indiana, USA</i></p>
	<p><b>Breanna J. Geyer</b> <i>Bethel University School of Nursing, Grace Campus, Winona Lake, Indiana, USA</i></p>
	<p><b>Samuel P. Abraham– Corresponding Author</b> <i>Associate Professor of Nursing, Bethel University, 1001 Bethel Circle, Mishawaka, Indiana, USA</i></p>

