

Doula - the new navigator of end of life care.

Several years ago hospitals identified a new job title – Nurse Navigator. That job has evolved but generally it is a communicator of the medical data for those undergoing significant medical treatment such as cancer to the family so that they have a clear understanding of the prognosis and treatment methods which will provide assistance in clarification of terminology and expected outcomes, in everyday language for patient and those who surround the ill. A Doula is much the same. They come alongside the dying.

A Doula is a new term for me even though I have been in the Grief support arena for over twenty years. As I came to understand the description, I wondered why it had not been with us for a long time. And perhaps it was. Historically the Doula job description folds together social workers, clergy or religious leaders, funeral home directors, medical care professional, legal advisor and family members who have been the care takers of those who are dying. A doula consolidates the varied activities to create a smooth parting in death, by serving the dying by filling the gap for those who do not have some or all of those resources at their disposal.

Why do we need a Doula to come alongside the dying and their families? In some cases there are simply no close relatives (either geographically or literally) to see to the end of life business. Sometimes the death is having such an impact for those in the inner circle, they are unable to cope with the details of the end of life planning. Through no fault of their own, they are emotionally frozen in grief and cannot begin to consider what needs to be done and in what priority to do them. In other situations those in the inner circle have such different opinions on how things should be done, that the disagreements on details literally “out shout” the wishes of the dying person.

The Doula makes no decision on behalf of the dying. They only facilitate the common elements of end of life business while demonstrating a compassionate and loving respect to the one who is dying.

What does this new job title actually entail? The job description may include many aspects of end of life activities with reminders of what can and should be defined prior to the actual death. A doula would in the best of circumstances be contacted when a terminal diagnosis has been confirmed by the medical professionals where a decision to pursue treatment to prolong life through medical treatment has been terminated or recognized as no longer affective. The Doula will ideally begin with some basic information gathering.

1. Conduct conversations with the dying, if possible, to identify their wishes.

What are the desires of the dying person in general? How do they visualize the last days and hours of life? Where do they wish to die? Do they want to be in a hospital, home, nursing home with hospice, alone, with family, without family, with clergy active in the final hours or other religious and meaningful participants? Helping them explore each of these options without influencing or pressuring

the dying to choose a specific path while insuring that the wishes are known by the key survivors as defined by the dying. Many of these questions are either avoided by the family or believed to be morbid or so distasteful that they fail to see the value of the gift of information can bring to those who are the survivors. In rural areas of the country the Doula role is filling the gap of needed services that are too far away to be easily accessed.

2. Who are the family or circle of influence that will be participating in the decisions made with or for the dying person?

Who is or are the survivors who the dying person wants to allow participation in their end of life business? Is there a list of who should be contacted prior to death and or after death to receive notice of the death and (if planned) funeral arrangements details. Who has that list? Who will be responsible to do the actual communications? The Doula collects and disseminates to the key survivors those pieces of information.

3. Are there funds or programs available to meet the requested desires of the dying?

Hospice available? Are there Government programs or Military benefits available?

4. What legal preparation have or should be completed? (Power of attorney, Durable power of attorney, a Will, insurance policies, safety deposit box, bank accounts with dual names on the account, social security numbers, titles to car, mortgage data, and investments) Where are they?

5. What funeral arrangement have been set up? (Pre-existing, burial location and method) Has a funeral been planned? How and where will the funeral occur or will there be a funeral?

Cremation: Will the ashes be interred or spread or split among the survivors?

Body Burial: Is there a need to transport of the body to another location?

Green Burial: Burial without embalming or a metal casket/vault

Green Burial is growing in popularity. Some states are setting up specific areas within a burial grounds, to accommodate this method for non-pollution of the earth. Due to space limitations and the revival of the natural state of man, the Green burial method is becoming a desirable interment in many parts of the USA.

Green Cremation: The ashes spread with many others who have died.

Spreading of ashes in a "common areas" such as a park, is part of the "earth to earth" movement. There is no headstones. The name is added to a plaque placed close by the ash spreading area.

New technology allows those who grieve to use an app which can be scanned to learn about the person. Those details may include, dates of birth and death, marriages, survivors, military data or pertinent information about the deceased which would not be captured on a headstone.

The responses to those basic questions will outline for the Doula, what steps to take next. Based upon the request of the dying, the Doula, will establish a clearing house of information for family, and work to insure that the desires of the dying are met if possible.

The Doula must be skilled at creative problem solving, a master at managing people and details, alert to changes from the dying, aware of religious or non-religious influences, a harmonizer, a person who is willing to be invited into a fellow human's last days on earth with compassion and honor.

Doula are seeking education and certifications to create credible roles with in the communities they service. Fee Schedules vary but usually aver based of hours and . They often create their own program by working with educational insititutions to build a knowledge base to allow them to as knowledgeable as possible in as many areas as their services encompass.