

Second Attendants in British Columbia: A New Training Model

Lainna Wheatley, BScM, MScM, lainna@shaw.ca

Joanne Przystawka, RN, puggs@shaw.ca

Dina Davidson, CLA, birthingway@shaw.ca

Abstract

To describe a new training model for second attendants within the Canadian model of midwifery care, to describe the need for second attendants, to describe what second attendants need to know, how they are used, to demonstrate feedback from students who have participated in the training model, and to describe how the training model was created.

Keywords

Second attendant, birth assistant, midwife's assistant, training, doula, labour assistant, home birth, water birth

Biographies

Lainna Wheatley, BScM, MScM, has been involved in midwifery, both as a consumer and later, as a midwife, since 1980. She is currently a faculty member of the midwifery distance-learning program from the Midwives College of Utah and teaches midwifery clients childbirth education classes. She has been facilitating Second Attendant Orientations since August 2003 and working as a second attendant in the Okanagan area of British Columbia since July 2002. Lainna has enjoyed her work in underdeveloped countries such as Mexico and Jamaica involving birth and “well woman/family care” projects.

Joanne Przystawka RN, MScN, is a freelance community health researcher and registered nurse. Joanne has worked as a community health nurse in northern B.C. and in Ontario for two first nations community health centres as a primary health care nurse practitioner. Joanne attended the Second Attendant Orientation in the spring of 2004 and has recently filled a locum position as RN (EC) at Shkagamik-Kwe Health Centre in Sudbury. Joanne hopes that nurses, nurse practitioners, and midwives, among other health care professionals, can engage together to provide women with dynamic reproductive health care.

Dina Davidson, CLA, is a mother of four, labour assistant (doula), second attendant, and midwifery student. After more than a decade of working as a professional writer and editor, Dina is currently completing the first year of a four-year BSc in Midwifery and plans to practice in British Columbia when her training is complete.

Second Attendants in a Regulated System

In British Columbia's regulated system of midwifery, a registered midwife and a second attendant must attend every home birth:

The ideal assistant to the principal midwife at a [home] birth would be another midwife. However, the second attendant the midwife will choose to assist at a birth will depend on many factors. Some of these will be dictated by the geographic area in which she works, the availability of appropriate professionals in that area, and the midwife's and the woman's preferences.¹

Second attendants fill an important role in assisting registered midwives at home births. Further, they help British Columbian women who wish to give birth at home by helping to ensure availability of coverage for home births in underserved areas.

Who Are Second Attendants?

Registered midwives are in limited supply in British Columbia. This constraint is felt keenly in rural areas, where a registered midwife may be practicing solo, with no other registered midwives for many hundreds of kilometers.

The same problems occur in urban areas. Though there is a greater concentration of midwifery practices in larger cities, practices are full, and the midwives are busy.

For a midwife to be called to be a second attendant at a home birth often means rearranging clinic schedules or spending her day off at a birth. This causes stress, not only for the principal midwife (will she be able to secure a second attendant for the birth? Will she have to transport her client to hospital because no second is available?), but also

for the second midwife who may have to give up personal time to attend the birth. One can only imagine the stress a midwifery consumer might feel amidst this uncertainty.

Because of these constraints, the second attendant role can also be filled by:

- Registered nurses
- Respiratory therapists
- Senior student midwives
- Nurse practitioners
- Other experienced individuals²

The second attendant, regardless of education and background, must have the following certification:

- Neonatal resuscitation (NRP)
- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)³

The second attendant must be competent in the following assessments:

- Vital signs (blood pressure, pulse, respirations, temperature)
- Uterine tone and position postpartum
- Blood loss postpartum⁴

The second attendant must have the following basic knowledge:

- Body substance precautions
- Basic knowledge of labour and birth
- Basic knowledge of instruments, supplies, and drugs used by midwives
- Appropriate record-keeping and charting
- Understanding of registered midwifery in British Columbia and the midwife's practice protocols⁵

Duties of a Second Attendant

The second attendant's primary focus is to assist the midwife. The midwife is responsible for the birthing woman and her baby as primary caregiver. As such, the second attendant takes direction from the midwife to ensure the safety and comfort of mother and baby. In the second and third stages of birth, the second attendant may do the following:

- Check layout of supplies to easy access to equipment and medications
- Check fetal heart tones (FHT)
- Check maternal vitals signs (blood pressure, temperature, pulse, respirations)
- Ensure warmth and safety of the newborn
- Check, report, and record the condition of the newborn
- Assess Apgar scores
- Check maternal fundus and lochia
- Document findings in the health care records⁶

In an emergency situation, the second attendant may do the following:

- Assist the midwife as needed to help manage shoulder dystocia, undiagnosed breech, non-reassuring fetal heart tones, and so on
- Phone emergency medical services (EMS)
- Assist with NRP
- Assist midwife in setting up intravenous therapy or intramuscular medications for postpartum hemorrhage
- Check maternal vital signs
- Assist with CPR
- Assist in preparation for transport⁷

In the event of a transfer to hospital for either emergent or non-emergent reasons, the second attendant does not generally accompany the midwife. Rather, she stays behind to pack up supplies and clean up so that the midwife can easily collect her equipment and the family returns to a calm and tidy home.

Where Are Second Attendants Used?

In British Columbia, second attendants are in highest demand outside of urban areas where the concentration of midwives is particularly low. In rural areas, second attendants are regularly used as backup for planned home births.

In urban areas, second attendants are used to cover gaps in areas where midwifery practices are stretched thin by great consumer demand and full caseloads.

Second Attendants at Home: Benefits and Challenges

Second attendants, simply by undertaking the responsibility of the role, must have a sense of commitment to be available for a birth, dedication to maintaining their skills, and a desire to assist in providing the type of setting a woman has chosen for her birthing experience. Knowing that you have assisted a midwife in providing a safe setting where a woman has chosen to birth her baby in the comfort of her home is an accomplishment.

The Birth of a Training Model

Before Sharyne Fraser, RM, moved to Penticton, B.C., there were no other registered midwives in that area. Because Lainna Wheatley had practiced before regulation, she would regularly get calls from women who requested her services. At that time, she was working on a degree in midwifery in preparation for registration and thus referred

midwifery enquiries to the midwives in Kelowna, a community one hour north of Penticton.

When Sharyne Fraser set up practice in Penticton, she went through the standard procedure of looking for a second attendant by putting up a poster requesting a second at the local hospital.⁸ With not a single response, she proceeded to apply to the CMBC to have Lainna approved as her second attendant.⁹ Sharyne and Lainna were both continuously on call when someone was due—about 5 weeks for each client from 37–42 weeks. Between Sharyne’s excellent guidance, poring over all CMBC documents pertaining to second attendants and the BC model of care, and attending births together with 20 years’ experience involving birth, Lainna was able to get a clear understanding of the second birth attendant’s role at a delivery.¹⁰ Further, because Lainna had worked as a primary care midwife before regulation, she knew what she had appreciated in an assistant and was mindful of the needs of the primary midwife.

After about a year of working with Sharyne, Lainna moved to Kelowna and Sharyne had several potential second attendants applying for the position. Following a discussion of how to fill the need for competent, efficient, and trustworthy assistants, Sharyne and Lainna ran a two-day orientation to inform potential second attendants of the ethics surrounding this position, their duties and the requirements of the second attendant. The training has been refined and changed over time to reflect the general requirements of varying midwifery practices, but the essence of the training is the same and is based on the CMBC guidelines for second attendants.¹¹

The Need for Orientation

Second attendants need to be oriented to the specific duties and responsibilities of working with registered midwives in a home birth setting. Many women applying for this position have worked in a hospital setting with general practitioners and need the knowledge and understanding of the midwifery model of care to bridge the gap.¹² Others, who are midwifery students or may have lengthy experience attending birth, also need to understand details about the current model of care and the specific needs of a registered midwife at a home birth. Some of these specific include:

- *Informed choice:* This distinct form of care begins from the first visit with the midwife to the last at six weeks postpartum and involves the midwife educating and informing couples of the choices they have during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. Each choice for a particular procedure or test has risks and benefits which can help the woman and her partner make the choice that is best for them. The second attendant needs to be mindful and respectful of the woman's choice to refuse or request a certain procedure. The birthing woman's body is her own, and together with her midwife she can explore her choices about her labor, delivery, and postpartum. Most of these decisions are discussed ahead of time, but the principle is applied even in the most basic areas by the second attendant: for example, when asking permission to take heart tones or touch the woman's body—this is a way of showing respect and honoring the woman.¹³
- *Evidence-based practice:* This goes hand in hand with informed choice and is an important aspect of the B.C. model of care. Second attendants should understand current research and be aware of the reasons a woman may choose to have, for

example, active management of second stage. She should also know how active management is carried out and be able to competently assist with the procedures involved.¹⁴

- *Home birth as a safe and viable option for low-risk women:* Second attendants need to have a clear understanding of the safety of homebirth for low-risk women with trained, registered midwives as primary caregivers. They need to be oriented to the current research, including the *Home Birth Demonstration Project* conducted in B.C., which offered evidence of the viability of this option for birthing women.¹⁵
- *Duties at a home birth:* Second attendants also need to fully understand their role and duties as outlined by CMBC policies for the second attendant and what their specific duties are before, during and after delivery.¹⁶

Table 1: Topics Covered in the Second Attendant Orientation

Introduction: Ethics & obligations	Duties at birth	BCRCP Abbreviations
Teamwork: Philosophy & communication	Assisting the midwife	Grams–pounds conversion table
Confidentiality	Care of the mother	Copies of pertinent policy documents
Availability while on call	Duties at the delivery	Sample of criminal record check form
What to bring to the birth	Postpartum care	Copies of pertinent studies
Locating the client’s home	Intermittent auscultation of fetal heart tones	Neonatal resuscitation
Reading requirements	Charting: what to record	Transport procedures
Certificate requirements	Mother’s supplies after birth	Cleanup duties
Other requirements: Training & education	Details and demo on how to set up the following birth trays: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth setup • Resuscitation setup • IV supplies setup • Suture setup • Newborn exam setup 	Emergency procedures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shoulder dystocia • Hemorrhage • Undiagnosed breech • Non-reassuring fetal heart tones • Shock
What to do when you first arrive at the birth	Samples of all forms and records	Assisting at a water birth

It is important to note that this training is not affiliated in any way with CMBC or any other regulatory body. Rather, the training is a private service for the midwives, their potential “non-midwife” second birth attendants, and the clients they serve.

Pathways to Training

Potential second attendants can take the Second Attendant Orientation via a number of channels:

- Attend a two-day intensive workshop. This includes a binder full of relevant reading and information.¹⁷
- Take the course Second Attendant (MDWF 144) via distance learning from the Midwives College of Utah. This version includes more detail regarding the B.C. model of midwifery care, evidence-based practice, informed choice, and so on. It also requires evidence of learning through syllabus work and other assignments.¹⁸
- Purchase the 6-hour training video and training binder.¹⁹

Who Benefits From This Training?

The following roles experience benefits through participation in this training:

Midwives: Midwives are very busy with hectic schedules. They are on call for long hours and are often up throughout the night only to have hospital rounds, clinic, or postpartum home visits to complete the next day. Having a pool of non-midwife second attendants allows midwives to have a break from call helping other RMs when they are tired, on call for their own births, taking maternity leave, or on holidays.

This training also assists midwives by allowing potential second attendants to be oriented without a lot of time spent out of their busy schedules.²⁰

Potential second attendants: This training, taken in its various forms, is excellent preparation for anyone planning to assist at home deliveries, whatever their background. If a student comes from a traditional medical environment, this training bridges the gap between these two models. If they come from another background, it helps prepare them to assist an RM appropriately in the Canadian midwifery model.

Consumers of midwifery: Having a large number of trained, oriented, approved second attendants allows women and their families greater access to the option of homebirth with a RM.

Feedback From Students

Students have much to say after taking the training:

It took it from the theory to the practical, especially listening to the little tips along the way...I can now see—it's real for me now.

—Jean Elmer,
Respiratory Therapist, Kelowna, B.C.

This is a great starting-off point for me because I am really very new into what's going on with midwives and second attendants.

—Jodie Petersen,
Respiratory Therapist, Victoria, B.C.

I think the most prominent part of the workshop that really will stand out in my mind is that I came in [to the classroom] with a lot of information but it was extremely fragmented—little bits and pieces from almost every paragraph in the book, but maybe one sentence. But what you were able to do... is put it all together for me so, I really feel now that I got a workbook of information instead of one sentence at a time.

—Lorraine Coughlan,
Staff Doula: Stony Plain Birth Centre, Edmonton, AB

To be shown the sheer joy of having birth at home with your family, your husband, just seeing that joy and how it should be, how it can be, was wonderful for me.

—Janine Siddall,
Licensed Practical Nurse, Kelowna, BC

Thank you, because its so hard—especially coming from a medical setting in the hospital where learning is around a stiff table—people are afraid to admit what they don't know. So I'd just like to thank you for honoring what I do know, but also for honoring what I don't know and sharing those experiences that I don't have much experience with. Just that broad spectrum of what normal birth is; normalizing birth, that to me has meant a lot. Normalizing birth, that it's not always a condition or complication, a special issue we have to deal with. It's meant a lot to me to have that support and knowledge given to me. Thank you for facilitating my journey.

—Liz Herman,
Registered Nurse, Kelowna, BC

I appreciate the organization that it takes to take a broad subject like this and try to summarize it into something that can be presented in two days.

—Terra Reindl,
Doula, Kelowna, BC

Because of the Second Attendant Orientation, I was able to anticipate the needs of the midwife and the laboring mum—acting in a timely and efficient manner. Lainna's sessions introduced a standardized role and outlined expectations of the

second attendant so that I knew what I needed to know and what was expected of me as a second attendant.

What a pleasure it was for me to participate in a home birth! What an honor it was to share in such an intimate family experience. As I was tidying up after the birth the picture was imprinted in my mind. The five-year-old sister perched up with pillows against the headboard on her parents' bed cuddling her flannel-swathed baby brother. She is smiling so proudly. This is what makes being a second attendant is so special.

—Joanne Przystawka (co-author),
Registered Nurse, Kelowna, B.C.

The workshop taught by Lainna Wheatley in Kelowna, BC, for second attendants was extremely helpful for me. The course was very well-organized and prepared. Lainna ensured that all important aspects were covered in detail and helped reinforce the skills we learnt with hands-on practice. The binders were a nice way to go home with all the information organized and ready for us to access. This course, along with NRP, has made me feel competent to attend births with the midwives in my community. The atmosphere of the course was especially comfortable and set up in a way that encouraged learning.

—Alyson Jones,
Second Attendant, Naramata, BC

I am a student midwife, mother, doula, and now a second attendant. Although I had already completed my NRP and CPR requirements before taking the Second Attendant Orientation, it wasn't until I completed the program that I began to feel truly confident in my role as second attendant. The biggest "light bulb" that went on for me was shifting from attending births as a doula, where I am there to

support the birthing woman, to the realization that as a second attendant, I am there to support the midwife. I am thrilled to be trained to provide this kind of support to my local midwife and contribute to home births in my community while I complete my midwifery studies.

—Dina Davidson (co-author),
Certified Labour Assistant, Port Moody, BC

This course is packed with invaluable information and hands-on experience. It clearly defined for me a second attendant's role, protocols and duties relevant to assisting the midwife at a home birth. It covers technical training through lifestyle implications, presented in such a way that there is something for everyone, no matter what your background or previous experience.

—Elizabeth Perry
Doula, Vancouver, B.C.

Feedback From Midwives

The content is the foundation of the roles and expectations of second attendants. The individual differences and preferences of the midwifery practice could easily be woven into the content once in an established midwifery practice. A solid foundation of knowledge and understanding will greatly enhance the working relationship between midwife and assistants. It is a gift to midwives to have available a comprehensive introduction to the roles and responsibilities of a 2nd attendant. Assisting at a birth requires knowledge, understanding and a high level of trust. This course will enhance and compliment the training of a second attendant.

—Sharyne Fraser
Registered Midwife, Penticton, BC

When I began training potential second attendants after they had completed Lainna's course, they were primed to move onto the next stage of learning. They came to births poised by having an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of both the second attendant and the primary midwife. The course covered a thorough ground of material that is necessary in the training of second attendants, relieving some of the burden on the midwife for the training. The course's resources are useful for ongoing training, as the material can be reviewed and practiced. The orientation manual is thorough and of exemplary quality. I believe that there is a potential to develop the role of second attendants in the province toward a sustainable system of midwifery and that this course has developed a foundational body.

—Barbara Barta
Registered Midwife, Kelowna, BC

¹ College of Midwives of British Columbia. Policy for Second Birth Attendants. In: Standards of Practice Policy. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; November 1998.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Wheatley L. Second Attendant Orientation Manual. Kelowna, BC: Lainna Wheatley; August 2004. pp. 9–14.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸ College of Midwives of British Columbia. Policy for Second Birth Attendants. In: Standards of Practice Policy. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; November 1998.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ College of Midwives of British Columbia. Informed Choice Policy. In: Standards of Practice Policy. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; April 1997.

¹⁴ College of Midwives of British Columbia. Model of Midwifery Practice. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; April 1997.

¹⁵ College of Midwives of British Columbia. The Home Birth Demonstration Project—A Summary of the Results. In: Home Birth Handbook for Midwifery Clients. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; October 2000. pp.17–22.

¹⁶ College of Midwives of British Columbia. Policy for Second Birth Attendants. In: Standards of Practice Policy. Vancouver, BC: College of Midwives of British Columbia; November 1998.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Midwives College of Utah: <http://www.midwifery.edu>

¹⁹ BirthJoy Consultants: lainna@shaw.ca

²⁰ Wheatley, Lainna. Portrait of a Second Attendant. In: Ovarian Connection. Fort Langley, BC: Louise Smith; March 2004: Vol. 2, No. 3.