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Evidence-based Interventions to enhance preterm infants' oral feeding performance

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The field of infant oral feeding research is understudied as the recognition of its importance came about with the increased preterm population and the realization that a large number of these infants after overcoming life threatening events are not safe and competent oral feeders; the latter, unfortunately, often delaying their discharge home from Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs). It is understandable that this research has taken a "back seat" to the more immediate concerns of saving these babies' lives. However, due to the limited research so far conducted in this domain, currently available therapies are limited and lack evidence-based support from the multi-disciplinary healthcare professionals caring for these babies. Consequently, in NICUs, time for introduction and advancement of oral feeding remain tentative and the management plan for individual infants often is not agreed upon by all. With a greater understanding of the development of infant's oral feeding skills, we have developed methods to monitor the maturation process of preterm infants' skills and devised interventions to enhance their feeding performance. This presentation introduces some novel, safe, and efficient interventions, e.g., swallow exercise, massage therapy, that were validated by a simple and new method, the infant oral feeding skills (OFS) assessment scale. This is an approach that does not require any special device and can be used at any time for assessing an infant oral feeding performance. This tool has also allowed us to examine the efficacy of currently used practices, i.e., why some approaches may work for some infants and not others.It is advanced that the availability of evidence-based support for any recommended approach(es) will improve compliance from staff members for the benefit of their young patients.

Biography

Chantal Lau trained as a basic physiologist, my interest in clinical research introduced me to the preterm infant population. She was attracted to the oral feeding difficulties these infants encounter that so often prolong their hospitalization in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) and the distinctive types of stressors experienced by their mothers and their impact on maternal behavior, lactation, and mother-infant bonding. Her research on infant oral feeding gained momentum over the last two decades with the increased survival of infants born prematurely, many of whom encounter difficulty feeding by mouth safely and efficiently. Through the development of the Oral Motor Kinetic (OMK) monitoring system and the Oral Feeding Skill (OFS) assessment scale, I gained an extensive understanding of how nutritive sucking skills mature. This allowed for the development of a number of efficacious and safe interventions to enhance preterm infants' oral feeding performance, e.g., oral tactile stimulation, massage therapy and swallow exercise. Efficacy of these interventions was validated by monitoring the maturity levels of infants' nutritive sucking monitored with the OMK and/or the OFS scale against their oral feeding performances.

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