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A holistic embrace: Development of an infant cuddler & family support program in a neonatal intensive care unit

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The Family Support Program (FSP) at St. Michael's Hospital (SMH) utilizes trained volunteers to cuddle hospitalized infants in the absence of parental or guardian presence in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). The program aims to provide universally recognized physiological benefits of cuddling to infants, as well as to alleviate stress for families associated with hospitalization and illness through companionship and the fostering of a welcoming environment. Opioid exposure during pregnancy can result in neonatal withdrawal after birth, also known as Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). As an inner city hospital with a diverse patient population, specific focus was given to creating a program at SMH that would meet the needs of marginalized families, including those struggling with substance use and addiction. The FSP was initially launched to optimally address the needs of infants experiencing NAS; however, many families encounter barriers to spending time with their hospitalized infants. Barriers could include, but are not limited to: single parent families or those with limited social support; continued employment after birth; parents with multiples; no or limited access to childcare for siblings; transportation; parental illness; need for parental self-care; and child protection involvement (restricting access or mandating outside program participation). Recognizing the benefits of a cuddling program for all infants and their families the FSP was extended as a standard of care for all infants admitted to the NICU. While volunteer cuddling programs are gaining momentum in NICUs in Canada; the FSP is unique in that the need for support for the whole family, and not just the hospitalized infant, is recognized as an integral program component. The creation, development and ongoing coordination of this program is led by social work and nursing and highlights how innovative programs can improve the quality of care provided to clients and their families. The impact of the Family Support Program on infants with NAS is currently being examined in a mixed-methods research project entitled The Infant Cuddler Study, with the aim to provide evidence that can lead to practice. The poster presentation will highlight how social work and nursing can take the lead in the development and coordination of a family support program in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Summary: The Family Support Program utilizes trained volunteers to cuddle hospitalized infants in the NICU. This social work/nursing led program aims to provide universally recognized benefits of cuddling, as well as to alleviate stress for families associated with hospitalization and illness.

Biography

Catherine is currently a Clinical Nurse Educator in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at St Michael's Hospital.

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