

STRESS IN THE NICU

INTRODUCTION

Stress is one of the main factors affecting one's efficiency as well as staff health and quality of nursing services. Neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) can be stressful environments for nurses, infants and families as well. Neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) is a unit designed to provide for sick and premature infants with care during the transitional period after birth in which the infant has the most physiological changes. The environment of NICU can be stressful for nurses as well as infants and their families. In these units, many personnel are involved in the treatment and care of infants. Neonatal specialists, nurses (usually a head nurse and primary nurses who are in charge of only one infant and perhaps a clinical nurse specialist trained in neonatal care), residents, and medical, nursing, and even midwifery students are present at any NICU. Among all staff members, nurses are responsible for the majority of everyday care procedures of the infants.

SOURCE OF STRESS IN NICU

As mentioned previously, NICU is a unit for taking care of ill infants during transitional period after birth. With the presence of preterm infants suffering from the greatest amounts of change, the nature of this unit is quite different from adult intensive care units. This unit has its own specifications, developed technology, and special physical design and equipments which should both meet standard criteria. In designing an NICU, spaces, lighting, atmosphere, sounds, and other environmental factors should be strictly considered to prevent further stress, exhaustion, tendency to leave work, professional interpersonal problems with colleagues, and negative effects on work and life of nurses.

in the viewpoint of NICU nurses, environmental factors (available spaces, lighting, atmosphere, and noise) had potential of causing stress for nurses.

Our findings related to large numbers of infants hospitalized in NICUs were also

in line with previous studies. Furthermore, according to the literature, the physical aspects of work such as sudden noise from the equipment in the unit is one of the stressors for nurses. In the present study, the overall atmosphere of the NICU (air conditioning) was also introduced by the nurses to cause moderate to high levels of stress. A reason might be the high temperature in the NICU due to the conditions of infants, especially preterm infants.

NURSE AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

taking care of too many patients (2-3 or more) by one nurse was also found to cause considerable stress.

Unpredictable, unorganized working shift schedules were also reported to trigger moderate to high levels of stress by 86% of our nurses. Such results confirm the inadequate number of nurses in the current care system. Hiring relief staff in hospitals can perhaps reduce the intensity of stresses due to the abovementioned reasons. Besides, eliminating disproportionate workload and staffing through appropriate scheduling and decreasing unpredicted changes would lead to lower stress levels.

emotional bond with the patient as well as bad prognosis and sudden death of infants were also indicated as other sources of stress among nurses. Witnessing death of a patient was reported as a source of stress.

Since long-term moderate and high levels of stress can cause health complications for the personnel and reduce the quality of provided services, it is advised to find ways to minimize environmental and human-related stressors in NICUs.

EFFECTS OF STRESS IN NICU

The effects of nurse burnout and stress in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)—high levels of absenteeism, low morale, mental fatigue, and exhaustion—can have detrimental effects on neonatal care. Because of the nature of this highly specialized form of nursing, NICU nurses can experience high levels of psychologic and physical stress. Burnout is a response to workplace stress that results in emotional and mental exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Job satisfaction, emotional support, and self-care are important components for preventing

burnout in staff. Therefore, the implications regarding practice and nurse burnout in the NICU are clear. It is the responsibility of both individual nurses and administrative leaders to take the necessary steps to prevent nurse burnout. Preventing this phenomenon in the NICU can lead to better retention and recruitment rates and delivery of safe neonatal care.

STRATEGIES TO HANDLE/ REDUCE STRESS

Although in occupational stress considerable attention has been given to identifying causes and consequences, relatively few attempts have been made to examine and identify the strategies nurses use to cope with stress. In a nationwide survey nurses were asked to complete a check list of coping behaviours developed from strategies nurses themselves said they used. The analysis identified six strategies. These included problem-oriented behaviour, trying to unwind and put things into perspective, expressing feelings or frustrations, keeping the problem to yourself and accepting the job as it is and trying not to let it get to you. The importance of these findings is discussed in terms of how coping has been defined, the role of palliative techniques and strategies for intervention.

CONCLUSION

There are two categories of environmental and Nurse and human factors were found to be stressors for NICU nurses. In addition, human factors caused significantly higher levels of stress than did environmental factors. Overall, stressors in NICUs were described as moderate. Having programs to reduce or eliminate these factors could increase the quality of services provided by nurses in NICUs and thus decrease the negative impact of stress on human resources.