



The New Mother Friendly NICU: Understanding and Improving the Postpartum Experience for Mothers of Medically-Fragile Infants

Renée M. Ferrari, Erin McClain, Sarah Verbiest, Nkechi Charles, Katherine Bryant, Christine Tucker, Alison M. Stuebe



Background & Purpose

- Mothers with babies in neonatal intensive care (NICU) face a host of challenges following childbirth.
- Compared with mothers of well babies, they have a greater burden of chronic disease, poor perinatal health outcomes, and are at increased risk for mental health problems, while at the same time are faced with navigating the health care system on behalf of their medically-complex infant and managing their own postpartum recovery.
- Limited research is available on the postpartum health needs of these women, despite thousands of mothers living this experience every day.

The purpose of this study was to explore the postpartum needs of mothers with babies in the NICU and propose actionable system improvements to address identified needs.

Methods

- We interviewed 44 English-speaking mothers aged 18 and older whose babies were in neonatal intensive care for at least 3 days as part of a larger mixed-methods study from June 2017 – May 2018.
- Interviews lasted about an hour, were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and were conducted either at the baby bedside, in a hospital room near the NICU, or by phone, depending on mother's preference. Mothers were between 3 and 4 months postpartum.
- Transcripts were coded and analyzed inductively based on a priori interview topics and emergent themes; NVivo12 was used to organize and manage the data.
- A NICU Family Advisory Board, comprising mothers who had previously had babies in the NICU, served in an advisory capacity providing input on instrument design and results interpretation.

Interview topics focused on the *mother's* needs and experiences and included: background and events leading to NICU admission, health needs including recommended and desired care, access to care, management of postpartum recovery, supportive health care systems, and suggestions for improving care.

Results: Desire to be by baby bedside impacts mothers' health



Results: Demographics

Average Weeks' Postpartum at Interview (range)	17 weeks (12-20)
Average Age (range)	31 years (20-45)
Race	
White	29 (66%)
African American	14 (32%)
Other	1 (2%)
Married/Partnered	38 (86%)
Insured	43 (98%)
Other Children in Home	24 (55%)
Residence while Baby in NICU*	
Home	32 (73%)
Ronald McDonald House	16 (36%)
Local Hotel	1 (2%)
Other	4 (9%)

*Respondents able to select more than one response

Conclusions

- Postpartum mothers of medically fragile infants are driven by an overriding desire to be at the baby bedside and will minimize their own health needs so as to attend to baby.
- These mothers experience significant social-emotional-mental health needs which, in this population, were coupled with difficulty accessing mental health services and support.
- Unmet practical needs, such as lack of childcare for other children, parking difficulties, and lack of a place to sleep while visiting the NICU, caused significant burden.
- No medical professionals were "officially" checking in on mothers, in spite of their unique postpartum health care needs.

Implications for Practice

- Interventions targeted at this population should consider mothers' overwhelming desire to be near the baby bedside and design services accordingly.
- NICU design/setup might consider devoting attention to mothers' postpartum comfort and health needs, such as providing a place to nap and comfortable chairs at the baby bedside.
- Mothers might benefit from a health professional assigned to round on them while baby is in the NICU.

