

A Survey of Parental Experience Within the Neonatal Unit During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Dear Sir,

In response to the coronavirus pandemic unprecedented restrictions on NICU visiting were introduced to safeguard vital services. To assess the impact of these measures and evaluate supports that could be offered we conducted a survey of parental experiences during the coronavirus pandemic.

Ethical approval was granted, and an anonymous survey of parental experience was performed from 22/06/2020 to 17/07/2020. Parents completed the survey on an opt in basis and 24 surveys were collected. At the time of the study visiting was restricted to 1 hour per day, with one parent visiting per time slot. Of parents surveyed the length of admission was greater than one month in 33%, one week to one month in 42%, four to seven days in 21% and three days or less in 4%. Of these parents, 71% found restrictions an additional stress. Eighty-three percent agreed that restrictions were necessary to protect babies, while 87% agreed restrictions were necessary to protect staff.

The survey showed that 58% felt restrictions affected their ability to bond with their baby and 71% of mothers felt restrictions impacted on their partner's ability to bond. Thirty-three per cent of breastfeeding mothers reported that restrictions affected their breastmilk supply, of importance given the many benefits of breastmilk in the premature population.

Seventy-nine per cent of parents reported that images of their baby sent via secure email alleviated their stress with many requesting more content throughout the day. Additional supports accessed included the Chaplain (16%), Lactation Consultant (42%), Consultant Neonatologist (54%) and Psychologist (42%). The majority (92%) reported that the neonatal unit was a safe place for their baby and felt that they were provided with adequate support.

We utilised the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS21) to assess these emotional domains. Thirty eight percent experienced varying degrees of depression, 29% experienced differing degrees of anxiety and 33% experienced variable degrees of stress. These levels are higher than seen in previous studies.¹

Many parents relayed stress at being unable to see their baby and bond as a full family unit. Parents found this time limit a negative aspect of their baby's admission. Other parents worried about the possible transmission risk they posed to their baby while visiting. Most families paid tribute to the empathetic nature of the unit staff.

This survey highlights the considerable stress placed on parents during the pandemic. Encouragingly, the vast majority of parents understood the necessity for restrictions. Similarly, the majority of survey respondents felt that they were well supported, and their baby was safe. The completion of the survey has allowed us to identify resources that we can use to support parents including video technology. Additionally, modernisation of hospital infrastructure to allow for recommended patient spacing could improve parental access during restrictions by allowing adequate social distancing. As we look towards the future, we must place value on parental accounts of their experiences during the first wave of the pandemic. This will assist us in formulating a comprehensive plan which safeguards services yet supports families.

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