

Parental stress - the influence of hospital stay length and neonatal unit differentiation

Fátima Pacheco Sousa¹

 orcid.org/0000-0002-6577-4344

Maria Alice dos Santos Curado²

 orcid.org/0000-0002-9942-7623

¹MSN, EESIP – Serviço de Neonatologia, Hospital de Santa Maria, Centro Hospitalar Universitário Lisboa Norte; Investigadora no grupo de Investigação Aplicada e Experimental em Enfermagem do Centro de Investigação, Inovação e Desenvolvimento em Enfermagem (CIDNUR), Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa.

²PhD, EESIP, Coordenadora do Projeto NIDCare integrado no Grupo de Investigação Aplicada e Experimental em Enfermagem do Centro de Investigação, Inovação e Desenvolvimento em Enfermagem (CIDNUR), Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa.

Abstract

Background

In Portugal, parents may choose to give birth in a public or private hospital, with differences regarding the support offered by Neonatal Units, which are classified according to the level of differentiation and specialization¹. Regardless of the location, the hospitalization of the newborn in a neonatal unit is a stressful factor for parents, which prevents them from developing their parental role^{2,3}.

Objective

To analyze the influence of hospital stay length and neonatal unit differentiation on parental stress during hospitalization.

Method

Analytical, cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach. Data were collected between July 2019 and May 2020 in seven public, private and public-private Portuguese neonatal units. The Administration Councils and the Ethics and Data Protection Committees approved the study. The parents who participated in the study signed free and informed consent forms. Parents (n=52) whose newborns were hospitalized, completed the Neonatal Unit Parental Stress Scale - Portuguese version (NUPS-PT)⁴, on day 2 of hospitalization and again between day 10 and 14.

Results

The analysis of the four dimensions that assess parental stress, reveals that in the dimensions Physical Environment and Sounds and Relationship with the Infant and Parental Role, throughout hospitalization, an increase in parental stress in the Highly Differentiated Neonatology Units, and a decrease in parental stress in the Special Care Units for the Newborn and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Discussion

The increase in parental stress throughout hospitalization in Highly Differentiated Neonatology Units is justified by the parents' presence in an excessively technological environment and the newborn's continuous need for complex and differentiated care, which prevents parents from developing attachment and parental role⁵. On the contrary, when their newborn is hospitalized in a neonatology unit with a lower level of complexity, parental stress decreases over time due to the feeling that the baby is no longer in danger, allowing parents to be involved in care provision and focus on the development of the parental role.

Conclusion

Reducing the existing stressors in Highly Differentiated Neonatal Units will allow integrating parents in the activities which promote the parental role and reduce parental stress, thus enabling the establishment of attachment and the development of parenthood.

Implications for the Development of Knowledge

By recognizing the existence of stressors in Neonatal Units and how they influence the parental role and parenthood, nurses will be able to define indicators to express the health

Corresponding Author:

Fátima Pacheco Sousa

E-mail: fatimasousa@campus.esel.pt



status of parents whose babies are admitted to the Neonatal Unit, thus contributing to the continuous improvement of nursing care in Neonatal Units and the development of the discipline.

Keywords

Stress; Neonatal Intensive Care Unit; Parents; Specialization.

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