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HELPING NICU FAMILIES TO HEAL

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The death of an infant is one of the most devastating experiences a parent could ever face. Although nothing can take away the pain in these parents' hearts, acknowledging and helping them deal with their grief is vital to the recovery process. Before the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) Bereavement Team was started, taking care of passing infants and grieving families left NICU nurses anxious and uneasy. There was no formal training or resources for NICU nurses on how to cope with these heartbreaking situations.

This gap in appropriate family-centered care, led a small group of brave, dedicated NICU nurses to join together to develop a better way to help deal with loss of an infant. This group attended conferences, researched evidence-based practice, implemented changes in the unit, and followed the outcomes in the NICU. They became known as the NICU Bereavement team,

standardizing the bereavement process and teaching nurses how to handle passing infants. Standardized processes increased nursing satisfaction by decreasing anxiety for NICU nurses taking care of passing infants and their families. Since then, the NICU bereavement team has made its presence known in both the UCSD Health System and the greater San Diego community.

Due to the success within the NICU, over the past year the NICU Bereavement Team expanded to include the Women and Infants Bereavement Team. This team now provides standardized care to all women and infant families experiencing a loss. As the group has flourished, the team goals grew.

On April 13, 2015 the bereavement team facilitated a one-day, 8-hour bereavement conference for the community. The team's vision was to educate health care professionals on the benefits of standardized care during the bereavement process and assist



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Nicole Dominguez, RNC is a charge nurse, past president of SCANN, and current chair of the NICU bereavement team. She was instrumental in the creation of the conference. Nicole helps the team continually update resources for parents and nurses, updates the WIS the policy and procedure, and completes education for all staff.

other hospitals in creating their own bereavement team. The conference included speakers from NICU, Labor and Delivery (L&D), Social Work, the community, and a panel of parents who had experienced a loss. One father described the birth of his daughter as the best and worst day of his life. He said that through the entire process, the UCSD NICU nurses allowed him to have the most time possible with his daughter.

The team had wonderful feedback on the conference. One nurse from Sharp Mary Birch stated, "This was a wonderful event that touched on a subject where there is not a lot of support or content on. I am excited to bring these practices back to my hospital." A great turnout brought over 81 participants, with 31 of these from neighboring hospitals. Representation from Sharp Mary Birch, Rady's Children's Hospital, and Kaiser were present. The parent panel was the highlight of the day for the attendees as well as for the parents that participated.

In addition to the conference, the UCSD Bereavement Team also helps coordinate events led by parents who have experienced a loss. Parents inspired by the nursing care given to them at UCSD, asked to join the team so they can give back. Their support and contributions have affected UCSD NICU and the community in amazing ways. Two of the parents on this team hold a community support group for those who have lost infants. They also helped create the infant bereavement book and leave their contact information in the booklet to serve as a resource for other grieving parents.

In addition to the conference and encouraging family involvement, the UCSD NICU Bereavement Team participates in "A Walk to Remember" every year. Empty Cradle, a non-profit organization,

whose mission is to provide support for parents who have experienced loss of a baby due to stillbirth, miscarriage, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), sponsors this event. A "Walk to Remember" is an annual event that honors lost babies by providing grieving parents with a continued memorial service that celebrates the small life that each infant led. Furthermore, the walk engages the community by increasing awareness and promoting support for grieving parents. Each year, the NICU bereavement team helps raise money for and volunteers at the event.

In the future the team hopes to increase community outreach by hosting another conference and expanding community involvement. The team's hope is to create a community that makes the hardest situations positive and memorable, while providing the best family-centered care.

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