Promoting attachment, providing memories

Ben Stenson

Nurses in an Edinburgh neonatal intensive care unit began using a cot side computer to write letters from neonates to their parents, who were encouraged to respond. Such exchanges have helped to break down the barriers that divide parents from their sick new born babies. Here are some of the records.

Dear mummy

I am really glad that you are my mummy because you sound, feel, and smell really nice. I am looking forward to be held in your arms properly and when I get a bit older I'll be able to focus on you and see how beautiful you are. That's what Dad says anyway and I believe him. Thank you for looking after me when I was on the inside—I felt really good in there—but I just couldn't wait to come out and see you. I know you have both been really worried about me in the last few days but I think I am feeling a little better now—hang in there Mum cos I'm hanging in there for you. I love you lots Mummy.

Emma

Dear Mummy and Daddy

Well that's the first day out of the way. I now have a long line in. What it means is I can have more food to make me fatter as I am a wee baby. I have got this bright light in my incubator because I am a wee bit jaundiced but under this light and under my bubble wrap hiding in my incubator I feel like the crown jewels. I was really chuffed you came up to see me even though I made you feel dizzy. I know that your bed is right below mine and that makes me feel a lot better.

Love and kisses

Aimee

Dear Mummy and Daddy

I have just written my letter to Santa, so will you please post it for me. It's stuck to my incubator. I dictated it to my secretary. Its quite exciting really 'cause this is my first Christmas. I'm told that I am too young for turkey and the trimmings. Have to make do with milk for this year. Did you see that I got a Christmas tree in my Advent calendar yesterday—I wonder what I'll get tomorrow. Anyway must go now—don't forget my letter to Santa so that he knows that I am here.

Lots of love

Andrew

Good morning Mummy and Daddy

I have just woken up from a lovely sleep and I have been a very good boy. My special breathing machine is making breathing a bit easier for me as small boys like me need some help. I have a very cosy wee house a bit like a greenhouse but more comfortable. There are lots of funnily dressed people here to keep an eye on me and I have found out how to make them come to visit me by making my bells ring. Hope you had a big long sleep Mummy and can come and visit me today if you feel better. Daddy said you will get rid of your drips, I need mine for a wee while longer till I grow a bit bigger. Phew I must stop now. I am tired with all this typing. It is hard work when your fingers are only small.

Bye Bye love Cameron

Dear Emma

Since you have been writing many letters to friends and family I thought I would write to you. Today you are 60 days old and unfortunately still in hospital but you are getting better. We are so disappointed that you are not coming home on Monday but when you are

completely well we will be delighted to dress you up and put you in the little car seat and drive you home. Dad and I miss you so much when we have to go home at night and leave you in Simpsons but we telephone every night and ask how you are. We have been buying you clothes and setting up your crib and longing for the day when you are with us all the time. In the meantime we shall keep visiting you and sing all those songs that Granny Ann teaches us. You are loved so much by everyone and we are so proud of you.

Welcome initiative

Family celebrations end abruptly when a baby becomes unwell. The parents are displaced as carers by the need for nursing and medical treatment and a barrier of technology quickly develops. Faced with the anxiety of losing their baby many parents choose to distance themselves hoping that this will make the loss easier. If their baby dies it can be difficult for them to take away anything positive. Neonatal staff recognise a responsibility to promote contact and generate positive memories. Our computer system has allowed us to develop a patient diary which has been warmly welcomed by parents.

"The diary has helped parents to develop supporting relationships."

Soon after an infant is admitted the nursing staff write a letter to the parents from their baby. This describes in light terms what is happening from the baby's viewpoint and welcomes the parents to visit. The letter is printed and taped to the incubator or sent to the mother if she is too unwell to visit. Most parents welcome the idea and encourage it, some are less interested. Messages to parents from their babies predominate but parents have written back to their babies and to the nursing staff. Babies, through their parents, have written to their siblings, to Father Christmas, and to neighbouring babies.

The diary has helped parents to develop supporting relationships with the staff and with other parents. Many entries are amusing but others are very moving. Parents telephoning about their baby's progress often ask what is written in the diary. Entries have continued up to and including the day of an infant's death. Bereaved parents have found a printout of the diary to be a treasured memory. An archive enables replacements to be printed if needed.

The diary has never provoked a negative comment and is mostly welcomed and encouraged. We have found it to be a useful addition to other methods of promoting attachment. Because it developed on an existing platform there was no associated cost. A computer system is not a prerequisite. A diary could easily be handwritten or typed on a basic wordprocessor.

This diary developed thanks to the imagination and enthusiasm of Sister Hilary Kerr and Staff Nurse Lindsey Kane and is a success thanks to all our nursing staff. I am grateful to the parents who gave their permission for extracts from their babies' personal diaries to be published.

Neonatal Unit, Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH3 9YN
Ben Stenson, lecturer in paediatrics

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