

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

The lived experience of fathers of preterm infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: a systematic review of qualitative studies

Background

Family-centered care is more and more acknowledged in Neonatal Intensive Care Units and although the approach advocates the active engagement of both parents in the care process, father's NICU-experience has received little systematic research attention.

Summary of results

Analysis of 14 qualitative studies of nine different countries (e.g. Canada, Sweden, Iran, UK) revealed three critical time points in fathers' experience with an preterm infant, which are delivery, NICU-stay and time after discharge. Authors highlighted five principal categories qualifying these experiences. The mentioned *emotional roller-coaster* comprises emotions of shock after unexpected event, worries about partner's and infant's health status and excitement of becoming a father. The *paternal needs* for information and for respectful treatment as the father of the child are growing over time of hospital stay and two major *coping strategies* emerge - hiding the own feelings and going back to work. *Self-representations* change over time from husband, observer and protector of the family, whereas transition to competent paternal self-representation is a long-lasting and challenging process. *Caregiving engagement* as soon as possible are recognized positively by fathers and supports parenthood transition.

Strength

This systematic review of qualitative studies provides an integrated view of main themes and their dynamic changes that characterize paternal experience of preterm birth and NICU stay. Thereby it conveys insights for NICU priority actions when taking care of preterm infants' fathers in family-centered care fashion.

Limitations

Lack of information within several included studies about infant characteristics and socio-demographic status of enrolled families impedes to consider their impact on fathers' experience of preterm birth and NICU stay. Review regards predominantly studies of mainstream western cultural background; more systematic ethnic diversity in upcoming research should take account of cultural differences in lived experiences of fathers.

Practical conclusion

Present systematic review underlines five main insights, that might work as bulleted priority actions for NICU staff: respectful attitude towards fathers as parents and not only supportive figures to the mothers, providing individual-tailored information based on mentioned worries and questions, offering possibilities to choose how and when to be present within NICU environment, actively engaging fathers for physical contact with the infant and kangaroo care and developing of a cross-cultural perspective, that considers cultural differences in emotional reactions and coping strategies.

Provenzi, L., et al, The lived experience of fathers of preterm infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: a systematic review of qualitative studies. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 2015;24, 1784–1794. doi:10.1111/jocn.12828

Written by: Patricia Hinner, Psychologist