Audit tool can help to standardise neonatal rights and family-centred care

Carol Davis outlines the benefits of a charter for improving breastfeeding rates, skin to skin contact and communication

AN AUDIT tool to improve family-centred care in neonatal units has received a Department of Health grant to further work aimed at changing practice to ensure the best outcomes for babies and families.

One third of neonatal units in England have registered an interest in using the new Bliss Baby Charter audit tool, and one fifth are already implementing it. The tool draws on the principles registered in the Bliss Baby Charter of 2005, which outlined the rights of a sick or pre-term baby for the first time, and outlined the care, respect and support these vulnerable babies need.

‘Much focus has been put on improving the clinical care that babies receive, especially increasing the appropriate number of specialist staff to be able to provide high quality care,’ says Bliss chief executive Andy Cole.

‘The Baby Charter standards complement these by highlighting the importance of many other facets of care. Clinical and family-centred care must work hand in hand to provide these babies with the very best opportunity to survive and thrive.’

**Grades of care**

Supported by a lead clinician, who can be a neonatal unit manager or matron, a multidisciplinary team can grade itself green, amber or red against the detailed provision set out in the standards of the audit tool. These standards make provisions recommending that every baby should be treated as an individual, and with dignity. It contains recommendations including protecting babies from noise and bright and continuous light, and that care decisions should be in the baby’s best interests and with active parent involvement. Breastfeeding and expressing breast milk should be encouraged, and a discharge policy implemented and co-ordinated.

The audit will help improve family-centred care and standardise it across units, argues Morven Masterton, senior projects officer at the charity who is responsible for the roll out of the audit and developing an accreditation process. ‘There are lots of benefits to family-centred care, such as helping to improve the relationship between staff and parents, and freeing up nurses’ time as parents take on more responsibility for bathing, feeding and changing nappies.’

Claire Campbell, who led the pilot audit at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle as senior staff nurse, agrees. ‘Since the audit we’ve improved facilities for parents, significantly raised skin to skin and breastfeeding stats, improved communication between staff and parents, and also been used as an example of best practice.’

The audit is backed by the Welsh Neonatal Network. The National Assembly for Wales inquiry recently heard that the shortage of trained neonatal nurses affects every health board. ‘Putting families at the heart of care makes for better care, and will also lead to benefits for trusts in terms of cost savings and for parents in developing hands-on skills,’ adds Ms Masterton.

Carol Davis is a freelance journalist

---

Jackie Cosh is a freelance journalist