Supporting the Bereaved Family in NICU

The family's need for support from staff varies greatly during this difficult time. Some families are ready to take charge and others welcome your suggestions. Most families are somewhere in between. One of the most important things health care providers can offer our families is an open and non-judgmental environment, and a willingness to participate in this experience in ways that the family defines as meaningful.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but is meant to offer you a few suggestions for supporting the bereaved family in the NICU. Being a partner in care, we need to acknowledge the unique experience, needs and desires of the families entrusted in our care. If parents have specific wishes, we need to assist them in realizing their requests whenever possible.

♥ Explain to the parents that they can see, touch and hold their baby if they choose to do so. Offer some options: cuddling, skin to skin, bath, a religious or cultural observance such as baptism. These options may assist the parents in creating opportunities for memory making.

♥ Use non-threatening suggestions such as:
  ▶ "Parents sometimes choose to...."
  ▶ "Some parents choose to spend time alone with their baby... Would you like to room in overnight with Mia?"
  ▶ "Would you like to take Mia outside?"

♥ Parents may not know that they may bathe their baby. Parents may want you to bathe the baby while they observe, they may want to do this themselves, or they may want you to assist them with the bath.

♥ Offer parents the opportunity to call in their family or other supports.
  ▶ "Is there anyone you would like to invite or to be here with you and Mia?"

♥ Families sometimes find it helpful to keep a journal during this time.

♥ Families could write a letter to their child to accompany them to the morgue, funeral home or crematorium.

SPIRITUAL CARE

♥ You can offer the caring and expertise of our Spiritual Care Team. This is a non-denominational team of professionals who, upon request, will come to assess and support the bereavement needs and wishes of our families.

♥ Spiritual Care can assist families in accessing a variety of religious or cultural services. They are available by pager 24 hours/day, 7 days/week.

♥ Families are welcome to invite their own spiritual/religious support people; for example, someone from of their religious community.
PHOTOGRAPHS

♥ Take 10-12 digital pictures. Have pictures burned onto a CD for parents.
♥ Photos can be taken both before and after death
♥ Dress the baby and possibly wrap in a blanket for photos following death, unless requested by the family to do otherwise.
♥ Offer them access to a professional photographers using the "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" organization. Help them to connect with one of the volunteer photographers (see binder in CNL office) and provide a pamphlet from this program (also found in binder).
♥ Since families who refuse photos have later changed their minds, please take some photos that will be kept on file with the NICU social worker. These photos can be of the dressed and/or bundled baby and/or of the baby with a special toy or blanket. Mementos are presently kept for 5 years.
♥ If you are new to this type of photography please ask for assistance from your colleagues, CNL, or Social Worker.

VIEWING

♥ Parents need to know that they may take as much time as they desire with their baby. They may take minutes, hours, or even days with their baby. They may choose to spend time with their baby, go away for a while and come back. They may choose to stay in one of the parent bedrooms.
♥ Parents may choose to take their baby to the Chapel.
♥ After the baby has been taken to the morgue, parents may change their mind and wish to see their baby again. This is routinely arranged. There is a viewing room near the Morgue, or we can bring the baby back to the nursery.
♥ Babies can be viewed after autopsy if the parents request to do so. Parents should be prepared for how their baby will appear, depending on the type of autopsy.

CLOTHING

♥ Parents may wish to dress their baby in a special outfit for photos and cuddling.
♥ Parents may request that their baby be dressed when taken to the morgue.
♥ Parents are welcome to choose an outfit from our Memories Cupboard for this purpose. Clothing that the baby is wearing during the time of death may hold special significance to the family. These items should be saved for the family.
♥ It is a good idea to notify the pathologist if there are any special instructions regarding the clothing or belongings that accompany the baby; for example the parents may want the baby dressed for the transfer to the funeral home or crematorium.
FOOT MOULDS

♥ We offer foot moulds to our families. Please inform families that they take at least 24 hours to set, and they can either arrange to have them picked up at a later time or the social worker can arrange to have them mailed to the family.

♥ The nurse can do the foot moulds with the family, another nurse, or the social worker. They can be done after death or before death, if the baby can tolerate being moved. You will need to seek out a staff member who is trained in making moulds. (Ask your CNL who can assist you.)

LITERATURE

♥ When Social Workers are unavailable, please give the family the Bereavement Kit. The kit is a blue folder which includes a variety of resources and readings.

♥ Kits can be found in the “parent handouts” drawer of the cabinet outside the CNL office. Please review the contents of this folder with the family and remove the ones that don’t apply. It contains important information.

♥ Parents should be given the booklet “Making a Decision about Autopsy”. This booklet is part of the death package found at the NICU reception desk.

BREAST MILK

♥ Mothers should be informed about the possibility of donating their breast milk.

♥ Please page the Lactation Consultant if the mother decides to donate her milk.

♥ You may give the mother the “Information on Milk Donation” once she has made this choice.

♥ Mark the mother’s milk in the freezer “for Milk Bank” so it is not discarded.

♥ Mothers who have been expressing breast milk should be given information about how to end lactation.

FOLLOW-UP PHONE CALL

♥ Discuss with the parents if they would be willing to receive a follow-up phone call once they have returned home.