Title: The Couplet Care Experience and Maternal Stress
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Background: An infant’s admission to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) increases parental stress. Commonly reported themes of parental stress include separation from the infant and alterations in the typical parental role. In a new model for newborn care in the NICU, referred to as couplet care, mothers receive their postpartum care in the same hospital room as their newborns who require NICU care. This new model may decrease feelings of separation and increase parental involvement, and therefore, possibly reduce parental stress. Previous studies have not examined the experiences of mothers who receive NICU couplet care.

Methods: This prospective cohort study examines stress of mothers who experience couplet care and mothers who qualify for but do not experience couplet care. The primary outcome of interest is scores on the Parental Stress Scale (PSS): NICU. This is a validated Likert scale survey to assess the degree of maternal stress with the NICU experience. The survey addresses three main domains of stressors: sights and sounds, infant appearance and behaviors, and alterations in the parent-infant relationship. Mothers additionally provide qualitative data regarding their experience, which provide themes of maternal stressors.

Results: 17 mothers whose infants were admitted to the NICU with the primary diagnoses of hypoglycemia ($n=10$), evaluation for sepsis ($n=5$), and other ($n=2$) were surveyed. Of the 17 mothers, 14 experienced couplet care. Responses to the PSS revealed that maternal age ($r = .71, p = .001$) and number of children ($r = .49, p = .04$) were positively correlated with stress scores. Mothers reported higher stress scores in the domain relating to alterations in the parent-infant relationship relative to the other domains. Qualitative data revealed that stress was commonly created by monitor alarms and the feeling of limited accessibility to the infant.

Conclusions: Increased maternal age and number of children were associated significantly with increased maternal stress. Both the qualitative and quantitative data provide important insight into stressors of the couplet care experience. Mothers highest stress scores related to barriers in the parent-infant relationship and their qualitative reports focused on the NICU physical environment.

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