

MILK (The Milk of Human Kindness)

Exploring the parental voice through arts practice

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'It feels like just watching time go by. If you have things to occupy the mind you put more positivity into what's going on and you don't feel so useless. Making something makes the time go quicker, it makes it go differently'

Parent



'Whenever there is a tour of the unit everyone stops at the artworks – they symbolise something, they encapsulate what happens on the unit, they are a springboard for a conversation'.

Consultant



'I love that they can leave a little 'bit of their baby' behind with us when they leave so that we can remember them.'

Nurse



Methods

- 80 > 100 parents (of NNU babies).
- 81 bi-weekly creative workshop sessions (metal embossing, print-making and embroidery) March 2016 – December 2017. Conversations between parents and artist took place during creative activities leading to narrative reflections, later integrated into public art works.
- 4 training sessions in creative techniques with 60 NNU staff.
- Metal embossing and embroidery tool kits.

Outputs

- 5 large artwork panels (screen printed textile and multi-media) permanently installed on the NNU in which bio-medical language is juxtaposed with the language of care and comfort; brain scans alongside precious toys; tiny hands and feet with parental expressions of nurture and hope for a child's future.
- Toolkits available for nurses or parents to lead arts activities at the bedside.
- Qualitative evaluation report.

Introduction

There are significant challenges for mothers and fathers on the NNU in becoming a parent of a baby in a highly medical environment.

An arts residency led by Sofie Layton offered an interdisciplinary approach through which parents were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences which the artist translated into artworks which culminate in a composite narrative for the challenging experience of caring for a baby in an NNU.

- A priority for the neonatal unit (NNU) is encouraging parents to be as involved as possible in the care of their babies.
- It was hoped that the arts process could give parents opportunities to be creative and take the focus away from the medicalised environment whilst still directly connecting to their baby emotionally.
- To meet other families in the same position could counter family stress by providing a dedicated focus on the parental relationship with their newborn babies.
- Staff were keen to transform the way patients and visitors experienced the NNU environment.
- An interdisciplinary arts process could complement psychological support strategies for families and parents.

Results

- Excellent engagement of staff and parents.
- Highly visible, unique and potent artworks creating connections between health and social narratives.
- Parents enabled to make meaningful representations of a baby they cannot take home, making positive use of the time spent by the cot-side and providing a bridge between home and the unit.
- Feedback highlighted: temporary reduction of parental anxiety; enabling focus on babies as individuals not defined by medical needs; distraction from reality of having to give up primary parenting role to doctors and nurses.

Conclusions

An interdisciplinary arts approach may aid parents and families to build narratives of strength and resilience in the NNU.

For staff the project has provided a further dimension of care and communication with parents.