

Implementation of a NICU Family Mentor Program

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Keywords: family mentor, peer support, patient and family centred care, neonatal intensive care unit

Having a newborn baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), whether preterm or full term, is a stressful and emotional time for families. Often the most effective family support comes from connecting with peers – other families who have had a similar lived experience.

Peer support has been a priority of the Stollery Children's Hospital's NICU Family Advisory Care Team (FACT) since its inception in 2010. Based on the success of the Stollery Family Bedside Orientation Program, a one-to-one bedside Peer Support Program on an inpatient pediatric unit, the NICU Family Mentor Program in the Stollery's 69 bed non-surgical NICU came to be in June, 2016.

The program was designed to further a culture of patient and family centred care, by supporting families in caring for their infant and engaging with their child's health care team through meaningful interactions between inpatient families and peer mentors.

Family Mentors are recruited through the Stollery Patient & Family Centred Care (PFCC) Network and through a Facebook page for NICU graduates. Interested parents are considered for the Family Mentor role if they have had experience with a child in the NICU and can commit 10-12 volunteer hours per month over a year. Family Mentors complete eight hours of training and an interview with the Stollery PFCC Coordinator to learn more about peer mentoring and explore their readiness to support families at the bedside. Training includes in-class instruction and role playing activities which emphasize peer mentor skills and attributes, such as:

- Strong listening and communication skills
- Awareness of role and, responsibilities and boundaries of a peer mentor
- Able to support families by using inclusive language and without passing judgment, creating emotional dependency or influencing family decisions
- Able to recognize when it is necessary to debrief or ask for help from a Stollery PFCC staff member or a health care professional

All Family Mentors are on-boarded as volunteers completing criminal record and vulnerable sector clearances, reference checks, baseline health screening, and signing a confidentiality agreement before interacting with families. Novice Family Mentors complete their first three volunteer shifts in tandem with a veteran Family Mentor before independently visiting families.

Family Mentors visit inpatient families bedside every two weeks and engage them by being a listening presence and having open, honest, judgement free conversations that foster strength, empowerment and hope in the inpatient family.

At the beginning of each shift Family Mentors check in with the charge nurse or unit social worker to learn which families are new to the unit and could benefit from a visit. Other pertinent information is also shared at this time. This professional oversight helps prevent Family Mentors from accidentally entering into emotionally volatile or intense situations that would require conduct and expertise beyond the scope of their role.

Family Mentors begin each visit by introducing themselves and the Family Mentor Program. Family Mentors emphasize their role as non-medical staff available to provide a listening presence for families. As well as acting in this role, Family Mentors aim to enhance family knowledge with information about:

- The unit and hospital environment.
- Best practices for patient safety.
- How to participate in a child's care and care team.

A formal evaluation of the Family Mentor Program is scheduled for fall, 2017, and preliminary results of this may be available for Oct 2017. Anecdotal evidence collected from inpatient families and staff indicate that the program has had a positive effect. Many families have indicated their appreciation of Family Mentor visits and one staff remarked "It's good to see Family Mentors here. We have lots of new families who could use a visit." Expanding the program to provide peer support for breastfeeding mothers and using peer support with families on the Antepartum unit are currently being explored.

The Family Mentor Program is an innovative and promising model that supports families in their role of actively caring for their infant children and participating in their health care decisions. Through this program, one-to-one bedside peer support has become a complementary but essential resource available to Stollery NICU families navigating what at times can be a complex and challenging experience.