

## **Senedd Cross Party Group on Nursing and Midwifery**

### **RCN Neonatal Nursing and Midwifery Briefing to accompany 20th October 2021 meeting**

#### What is neonatal care?

Neonatal care is provided to newborn babies who are born prematurely or who are sick at birth.

Around 35,000 babies are born each year in the 26 maternity units across Wales. Around nine to ten per cent of these will need admission to a neonatal unit. There are 11 units in Wales providing a range of different levels of neonatal care<sup>1</sup>

Premature babies have specific problems such as respiratory difficulties or nutritional needs that can be life threatening. Neonatal nurses ensure that treatment and skilled knowledgeable care is given promptly and appropriately.

The survival rate of sick new-born babies continues to improve.

#### What is neonatal nursing?

Neonatal nurses provide care for babies that have been born prematurely or who are sick at birth.

To become a neonatal nurse, an individual will have first to complete a three-year pre-registration nursing degree (adult or child) or a midwifery degree. In recent years an increasing proportion of neonatal nurses come from the background of a nursing (child) pre-registration degree. To advance their careers, and a desirable quality the nurses working in neonatal units, they can achieve a Postgraduate Certificate in Enhanced Neonatal Care. From a service perspective to develop a neonatal unit there needs to be enough nurses to provide the appropriate level of care. Health boards are currently responsible for commissioning education in advance neonatal care and funding nurses to complete these studies.

The Royal College of Nursing Wales is calling for a national approach to develop neonatal education to ensure consistency across Wales in the level of care provided.

#### What are the different types of neonatal care?

**Neonatal Intensive care:** Babies are cared for here when they:

- Need breathing support given through their windpipe (called ventilation)
- Have severe disease affecting their breathing (called respiratory disease)

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://collaborative.nhs.wales/networks/wales-maternity-and-neonatal-network/>

- Need or have just had surgery

**Neonatal Special care:** Babies that do not require intensive care but still need care, care can include

- Monitoring their breathing or heart rate
- Giving them more oxygen
- Treating low body temperature
- Treating low blood sugar
- Helping them feed, sometimes by using a tube
- Helping babies who become unwell soon after birth

**Neonatal Transitional Care:** This is where parent and baby stay together in hospital whilst the baby receives care. It means the baby is well enough to stay with the parent, either in the postnatal ward or a room on the neonatal unit, with support from the hospital staff.

**Midwifery Led Units:** Run by midwives, a dedicated unit for women with a low risk pregnancy

**Obstetric Led and Alongside Midwifery Led Units:** Run jointly by Obstetricians and midwives. For women with a low risk pregnancy.

#### What is available across Wales?

**Aneurin Bevan:** one Obstetric Led & Alongside Midwifery Led Unit, a Neonatal Intensive Care and Special Care Baby Unit and three Freestanding Midwifery Led Unit

**Betsi Cadwaladr:** three Obstetric Led & Alongside Midwifery Led Units, two Special Care Baby Unit, two Freestanding Midwifery Led Unit and a Sub Regional Neonatal Intensive Care Centre (SuRNICC).

**Cardiff and the Vale:** one Obstetric Led and Alongside Midwifery Led Unit and a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

**Cwm Taf:** two Obstetric Led & Alongside Midwifery Led Unit, one Local Neonatal Unit, one Special Care Baby Unit and a Freestanding Midwifery Led Unit

**Hywel Dda;** two Obstetric Led & Alongside Midwifery Led Unit, one Freestanding Midwife Led Units

**Powys;** no neonatal units, six Freestanding Midwife Led Units

**Swansea Bay;** one Obstetric Led & Alongside Midwifery Led Unit, one Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and one Freestanding Midwifery Led Unit

#### Are there adequate staffing levels?

Staff in neonatal and special care baby units need to be available in sufficient numbers and with sufficient knowledge, experience and training to offer safe and effective care to babies and their families.

The Nurse Staffing Levels (Wales) Act 2016 protects the patient and empowers the workforce. Section 25A places an overarching duty on local health boards and NHS trusts to regard the importance of providing sufficient nurses in all settings. This also applies where health boards are commissioning services from a third party. This duty came into force in April 2017.

The Royal College of Nursing has also produced workforce standards that are designed to support a safe and effective nursing workforce alongside each nation's legislation.<sup>2</sup> The standards focus on three key themes: clinical leadership and safety; responsibility and accountability and health, safety and wellbeing.

There is also specific neonatal guidance for nurse staffing levels in the British Association for Perinatal Medicine, Framework for Practice.<sup>3</sup>

Staff in neonatal and special care baby units need to be available in sufficient numbers and with sufficient knowledge, experience and training to offer safe and effective care to babies and their families.

The minimum standards for staffing levels for neonatal services should be:

- Neonatal Intensive care: 1:1 nursing for all babies
- Neonatal Special care: 4:1 nursing for all babies
- Neonatal Transitional Care 4:1 nursing for all babies

However, as we heard in the Cross Party Group, October 2021, staffing levels guidance is cannot always be followed, due to staff sickness and staff leaving the profession. This sometimes results in the closure of cots and babies needing to be moved.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic there were significant challenges with staffing. At one point Swansea Bay had a sickness rate of up to 40%.

### **Improving the sustainability of the neonatal nursing workforce**

In order to meet the staffing challenges, Wales need to develop sufficient numbers of neonatal nurses, this must happen through adopting a national approach.

In a recent report, Nursing in Numbers 2021, RCN Wales recommended a number of actions for the Welsh Government to address the challenges facing the workforce. These included

- The Welsh Government must publish registered nurse vacancy data to improve workforce planning across all sectors.
- The Welsh Government, NHS Wales and HEIW should develop a national NHS nursing retention strategy to keep nurses working in NHS Wales.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-workforce-standards-uk-pub-009681>

<sup>3</sup> Optimal Arrangements for Neonatal Intensive Care Units in the UK including guidance on their Medical Staffing, [https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/bapm/file\\_asset/file/131/Optimal\\_Arrangement\\_for\\_NICUs\\_revision\\_10-6-21.pdf](https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/bapm/file_asset/file/131/Optimal_Arrangement_for_NICUs_revision_10-6-21.pdf)

- The Welsh Government should instruct HEIW to produce a strategy to commission and develop post-registration nursing (including neonatal nursing) to ensure Wales has the skills and knowledge needed to care for the public.

The full list of recommendations and the report can be found [here](#).

### **About the Royal College of Nursing (RCN)**

The RCN is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union of nurses, representing around 435,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors, healthcare support workers and nursing students, including over 27,000 members in Wales. RCN members work in both the independent sector and the NHS. Around two-thirds of our members are based in the community. The RCN is a UK-wide organisation, with its own National Boards for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in nursing practice and shapes health and social care policy.