



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Building confidence in neonatal bereavement: The use of simulation as an innovative educational approach

Philippa Colwell, PGCE, NMC Teacher, Enhanced Neonatal Practice (R23), RSCN (BHons), PEF (Practice Education Facilitator), The Academy, UHSM, Senior Sister NICU, CMFT*

^a *The Academy, UHSM, Southmoor Road, South Manchester, M23 9LT, United Kingdom*

^b *NICU, St Mary's Hospital, CMFT, United Kingdom*

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract Neonatal death is an unfortunate, yet recurrent incidence. Care of the dying infant is recognised as a care event that both paediatric nurses and midwives will encounter during their professional life. Thus students should be exposed to such subject matter during their training; however, a curriculum review identified gaps in local pre-registration infant bereavement education. It is recognised, though, that it can be difficult to participate in and develop crucial skills in neonatal bereavement, whilst learning in clinical practice.

A contemporary simulated educational approach was developed, to examine management and coping strategies, for student paediatric nurses and midwives. These students were able to learn interprofessionally, from a combined teaching approach by expert neonatal nurses and the simulation faculty. An assessment of learning showed that a large percentage of participants felt the session enhanced their practice.

This innovative Neonatal Simulated Bereavement Session was the first of its nature in the Northwest of England and has been shared at conference with the Northwest Neonatal Simulation Network, which leads on infant simulation in the region.
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* The Academy, UHSM, Southmoor Road, South Manchester, M23 9LT, United Kingdom.
E-mail addresses: Philippa.Colwell@uhsm.nhs.uk, Philippa.Colwell@nhs.net.

Introduction

Neonatal Bereavement is an unfortunate, yet reoccurring situation (3.8/1000 births, 2013 ([Office for National Statistics, 2015](#))). In the sphere of Neonatology, infants may pass away at birth (1/216 stillbirths per year in the UK (National Office for Statistics, 2015)) or during treatment on a Neonatal Unit, from conditions such as prematurity, congenital abnormalities and genetic disorders ([Sands, 2016](#)). Neonatal Death is a global occurrence, contributing to 45% of child deaths less than 5 years old ([WHO, 2016](#)).

Consequently, it is accepted that paediatric nurses will encounter such care of the dying in this patient group, during their career ([Pearson, 2010](#)), as will those in the midwifery profession, who also have vital role in the care of the bereaved family ([Leyland, 2013](#)). Hence, nurses and midwives have a fundamental need to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence with bereavement, to be able to provide high quality support and care, to those affected.

Studies have found that historically, assistance for professionals to develop such knowledge and skills has been deficient ([Wallbank and Robertson, 2008](#)). Furthermore research has shown that, a scarcity of education in bereavement contributes towards a lack of confidence in the management of families who are bereaved, resulting in an incapacity to meet their care requirements ([Reid et al., 2011](#)). This lack of support and education is mirrored in pre-registration education also, highlighted in a curriculum review with lecturers, practice education facilitators and students in attendance, in accordance with findings from the literature ([Jonas-Simpson et al., 2013](#); [Zhang and Lane, 2013](#)). Student paediatric nurses voiced their concerns at the lack of bereavement training on their current programme of study and both faculty and the learners considered that an opportunity to enhance these skills would be advisable and most beneficial in the pre-registration period of training.

As bereavement is an especially sensitive moment in patients' lives, it may be challenging for mentoring health professionals to involve students, at the time of occurrence. Simulation is an extremely useful educational method for this type of instance, as learners can face such situations in a secure atmosphere ([Arthur et al., 2013](#)), away from direct patient contact. By using a simulation suite, set up as either a NICU or

bereavement room, fidelity of the situation can be achieved, which can enable the learner to perceive they are in a potentially real clinical environment ([Stanley, 2012](#)). Simulation is also exceptionally valuable as it emphasises debrief throughout the session, as an educational tool, providing opportunity for the participants to discuss key issues and incorporate the learning in to their continuing professional practice ([Cantrell, 2008](#)). Research has shown that exploration of feelings and coping mechanisms in this manner, of professionals involved in bereavement, can be restorative and enable staff to sustain their work in this area ([Maloney, 2012](#)).

A contemporary simulated harm free ([Aggarwal et al., 2010](#)) educational approach was developed, to examine and cultivate management and coping strategies for student paediatric nurses and midwives, professionals who would potentially be encountering infant bereavement in clinical practice. The students were able to learn interprofessionally, from a combined teaching approach by expert neonatal nurses and the simulation faculty. The educational simulated session that was developed, was piloted for use with student paediatric nurses and midwives, who evaluated the session. The aim was to examine the use of simulation, as a potential alternative and novel teaching method, in the subject matter of infant bereavement, to complement and enhance existing learning materials and formats that are available.

This innovative Neonatal Simulated Bereavement Session has been shared in conference with the Northwest Neonatal Simulation Network, as the first of its kind in the region. Recently, other areas in the UK, such as Bradford have initiated simulation as part of their education and training package for the neonatal multi-disciplinary team, recognising the value of this educational tool in enhancing knowledge and skills in bereavement ([Vasudevan and Minchella, 2015](#)).

Internationally there are also examples of simulation being used as a valuable learning tool, expanding student nurses awareness and competence in perinatal loss ([Riley-Baker and Sisk, 2014](#)). It has also been used to foster the maturation of communication with student midwives, to practice and promote appropriate and sensitive choice of language, in difficult situations, such as neonatal bereavement ([Donovan and Forster, 2015](#)).

In summation, this article aims to demonstrate that simulation can be used as part of a modern

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