

Parents also reap the benefits of prenatal care

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Everybody knows that micro-preemies are provided with the maximum amount of medical care that hospital neonatal intensive care units can provide.

But what about the parents?

It's a thorny question that nurses and doctors wrestle with every day. Being available for moms and dads who are "going through the emotional crisis of their lives" is a crucial element of their jobs, said West Bloomfield's Mara Sipols-Lens, nurse manager of the NICU at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

"You can be in other crises in your life," Sipols-Lens said. "But your child. I don't know what else competes with the emotional baggage that comes with that. And with that, we do whatever we can to cater to families."

That's really the bottom line."

Consulting with parents about their sick, tiny infant can be a touchy proposition for medical caregivers, given the state of mind many parents have — that they are grieving over not having the typical pregnancy and delivery.

"It's part of being a parent of a premature baby to go through a grief process, even in cases when the baby is ultimately going to be well," said Dr. Daniel Batton, who is Beaumont's chief of newborn medicine and a Birmingham resident. "Parents grieve. They grieve the loss of their wished-for baby, which is a normal, full-term baby. So this is important when we try to communicate with parents."

That communication sometimes entails repeating information to parents, who might not be fully hearing and understanding what doctors are telling them. "We have to be patient with how we speak with them," Batton said. "And we have to recognize they aren't going to hear much of what we say, at least initially."

Linda Onstead, nursing manager of the NICU at Providence

Hospital in Southfield, said the hospital's parent support group meetings prompt frustrated moms and dads to vent their anger.

"People think of this as the happiest time of their life," she said. "And something didn't go as well here, something didn't go as planned. But in these classes, we let them know it's OK to be angry..."

"They're going through a grief process. Because they didn't have the normal pregnancy. All of a sudden some of these moms are delivering two or three months early, they were deprived of a lot of things (such as Lamaze class). They might not even have their (baby's) room ready."

Bloomfield Hills perinatologist Dr. William Michaels simply said "From a physician's perspective, I could not help but feel (parent's) level of anguish and understand that this event they had not anticipated or planned for had changed their lives and the lives of their children."

With many parents spending weeks and even months in NICU's, nurses have a lot to deal

with — besides the health of micro-preemies.

Beaumont NICU nurses such as Barbara Cain of Rochester Hills fully understand that reality.

"One of the challenges," Cain said, "is getting the parents to bond with the child. Because a normal full-term baby is given to the parents immediately after they're born, (whereas) micro-preemies are taken away immediately and we get them."

Agreeing was another NICU nurse at Beaumont, Jennifer Andres, who said moms of micro-preemies have difficulty accepting that "the baby's already here and is not still inside of them."

That's why she doesn't overload parents with information in the first few days and weeks following a premature birth.

"I try to incorporate the family very slowly," said Andres, "giving them only the information I think they could actually process at that time. Because they're in such a state of shock by the environment. An every day person is not going to see what the unit entails."

And, as Cain explained, parents often don't see their NICU babies "until hours later, sometimes they cannot hold them until days later. So to get the parents involved in the care, and get comfortable with the care, ... just touching the baby sometimes is a monumental moment."

'Never give up hope,' says WB woman

For parents of micro-preemies who are now going through months of hell in hospital NICU's, questioning if it's worth all the trouble, West Bloomfield's Phyllis Sellers has a simple, straight-forward message she learned through her son, Ryan.

"If they have a premature baby, never give up hope, even when it looks really bad. Things happen miraculously, things can turn out."

And don't underestimate the will to live that these tiny infants possess.

"Science is not exact," she said. "One can never predict the outcome of a person, the personal drive of a kid. Yes, Ryan was a baby. But his personal drive is what got him through. ... He's had to overcome some huge hurdles in his life so far. You can't make that judgment when they're this small."

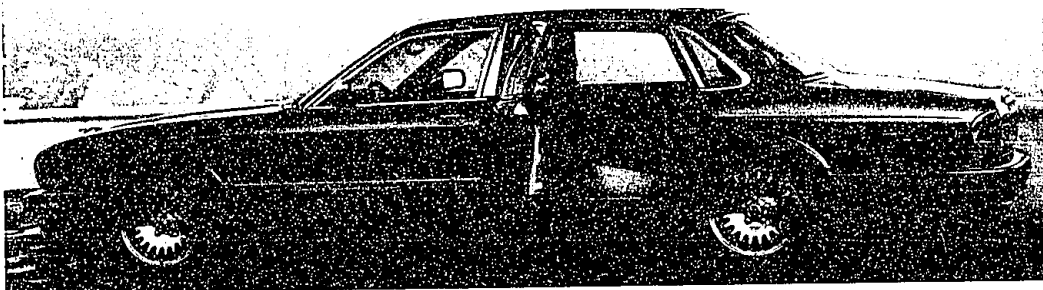
She held her two hands about a foot apart to illustrate her point.

"Personally, I can't turn my back on them. You have to have faith that everything will work out."

— by Tim Smith

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