



**National  
Association of  
Neonatal  
Nurses**

# **NICU Nurse Involvement in Ethical Decisions (Treatment of Critically Ill Newborns)**

## **Position Statement #3067**

NANN Board of Directors  
May 2016

The National Association of Neonatal Nurses (NANN) believes that the process of making ethical decisions in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) should incorporate family desires, infant conditions, and the ability of the healthcare team to provide meaningful care. To that end, NANN supports the inclusion of NICU nurses in making ethical decisions in the care of the critically ill newborn.

### **Introduction**

In the NICU there are patients who, despite valiant efforts, do not respond positively to any support or interventions. These are infants with diagnoses such as extreme prematurity, multiorgan system failure, birth accidents, and congenital conditions, whose outcome, despite extensive intervention, remain unchanged or will continue to deteriorate, resulting in death. There are other newborns for whom the prognosis may be less clear and for whom decisions surrounding the direction of care will need to be made at various points during their hospital course.

Society continues to struggle with the appropriate extent of medical intervention and parental involvement in decision making for infants who have uncertain outcomes. The diversity of the social, cultural, or spiritual orientation of both families and care providers, as well as the differing theoretical framework of nurses and physicians, may make reaching a consensus difficult. When making ethical decisions concerning the treatment of the critically ill newborn, parents, neonatal nurses, and other members of the healthcare team often use the “best

interests of the patient” standard. In the NICU, the patient includes all family members. This is essential to remember as parents assess which option is best for the whole family when extraordinary demands are made upon them.

During their infant’s hospital course, parents may experience difficulty in supporting decisions to institute, continue, or discontinue certain treatments. In the setting of decision making for their critically ill newborn, parents require assistance from the healthcare team to interpret and process complex information regarding their infant’s condition. At times, the uncertainty of the prognosis may make such interpretation even more difficult, and conflict within the patient care team may arise. To provide parents opportunities to develop a better understanding of their infant’s changing condition, they must be involved in ongoing discussions during which the infant’s status and plan of care are presented and decisions are made. Information they receive from any member of the multidisciplinary healthcare team must be consistent to foster open and trusting relationships. Parents need assurance that they do not bear sole responsibility in making care decisions but do so as part of the patient care team that includes the parents, healthcare providers, clergy, and social workers.

### **Contributions of NICU Nurses**

NICU staff and advanced practice nurses are a constant presence in the lives of patients and their families. They are positioned to both understand the implications of a patient’s complex medical condition and become familiar with the customs, feelings, and attitudes of the infant’s family. Nurses are most often the first members of the healthcare team to whom the parents express their hopes and wishes. In addition, NICU nurses implement actions based on decisions made with regard to providing or withdrawing certain treatments.

The neonatal nurse is an essential contributor to the decision-making process surrounding the care of the critically ill neonate, including involvement in the ethical challenges that may occur regarding the level of care provided. As an individual, the nurse has a right to agree or disagree with the parents’ or physicians’ decisions, but he or she should express these opinions in a respectful, collegial manner, which may lessen the intensity of moral distress and conflict. It is essential that there is an opportunity to seek input from a bioethical consultant or request a consult from an ethics committee to assist in conflict resolution. Outside of extraordinary circumstances, the parents’ wishes regarding care should be honored.

### **Conclusion**

As the professional voice of neonatal nurses, NANN recommends that nursing is part of the multidisciplinary team that facilitates decision making affecting the health and wellbeing of the infant throughout the hospital stay. For nurses to contribute to the decision-making process, NANN recommends education for nurses in the theory and practice of ethics in health care, conflict resolution, and bereavement support training.

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