

**Interested in becoming a neonatal nurse? Nicola Davies explains what the job entails**

## CARE AT THE START OF LIFE

**Of all the patient groups nurses encounter, neonates are probably the most vulnerable.**

Caring for neonates takes a high degree of dedication and skill, so if you are considering working in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), ask yourself the following questions:

### **Does my education and work experience suit this career?**

A bachelor's degree in nursing can lay the foundation for becoming a NICU nurse, with some degrees offering elective modules on NICU nursing. Postgraduate and certificate programmes offering specialisation in neonatal nursing are also available at many universities.

### **How interested am I in neonatal nursing?**

An interest in children's and neonatal nursing is essential. A previous position in a paediatric or maternity unit, for example, will give nurses an insight into caring for babies and their special needs. Work experience and skills acquired in a children's or infant unit will add to your prospects of becoming a NICU nurse.

### **Am I emotionally ready?**

Neonates are likely to spend more time with nurses than other patients. Essentially, nurses become surrogate parents, and the emotional burden of the job is often under-recognised.

While some neonates will be in NICU for a short period, others can be long-term patients with many complex problems.

NICU nurses require resilience and an ability to deal with difficult



*Neonatal nursing requires a high degree of personal resilience*

situations such as variations in neonatal health status and death. NICU nurses also need to be emotionally and psychologically available to children's families where the emotional toll may be great. Strategies such as nurse support groups can help.

### **Do I have the skills?**

The health status of neonates can be more serious and more delicate than that of older patients, so mastering the necessary skills is a necessary component of becoming an efficient neonatal nurse. For example, establishing an intravenous infusion in neonates is complicated and requires advanced nursing skills.

Exceptional critical thinking and analytical skills to cope with the rapidly changing health status

of neonates are essential. Good communication and collaboration skills are necessary to work in the often close-knit multidisciplinary team. Attention to detail and precise documentation are also part of the skill repertoire of NICU nurses.

In addition to routine nursing equipment, a number of NICU-specific gadgets and equipment are used to control neonates' physiological functions. While technical adeptness is not necessarily mandatory, being comfortable with the technology used in the NICU is an invaluable attribute.

A degree of technical insight and troubleshooting knowledge should the equipment fail is useful. Such proficiency is particularly important because of the fast pace of work among very sick patients, whose status can change quickly and dramatically.

NICU nursing can be a priceless experience, especially when a child recovers and can be discharged to a ward or even to the care of parents. However the NICU can also be an area of heartbreaking frailty where babies deteriorate and die. Nurses need rigorous education, broad work experience and personal resilience to nurse delicate neonates to health **NS**

**Nicola Davies is a writer and health psychologist**

### **RESOURCES**

**RCN children's and neonatal intensive care community**  
[tinyurl.com/RCNcnnnc](http://tinyurl.com/RCNcnnnc)

**Scottish neonatal nurses group**  
[www.snnng.org.uk](http://www.snnng.org.uk)