Systematic review of qualitative studies exploring parental experiences in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

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**Aims and objectives.** To determine the feasibility and utility of a thematic analysis approach to synthesising qualitative evidence about parental experiences in the neonatal intensive care unit.

**Background.** Admission of infants to the neonatal intensive care unit is usually an unexpected event for parents who can cause them to experience psychosocial difficulties. A qualitative systematic review is the best method for exploring these parents' experiences regarding this type of admission.

**Design.** Systematic review.

**Methods.** Qualitative studies in peer-reviewed journals aimed at understanding parental experiences regarding infant neonatal intensive care unit admission were identified in six electronic databases. Three reviewers selected relevant articles and assessed the quality of the methodological studies using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify the most common themes in the studies describing parental experiences in the neonatal intensive care unit.

**Results.** A total of eighty articles were identified; nine studies were included in this review. Four studies used semistructured interviews, three used interviews, one used self-reporting and one used both focus group and interview methodologies. Common themes across parents' experiences were the stress of hospitalisation, alteration in parenting roles and the impact of infant hospitalisation on psychological health.

**Conclusion.** Having an infant hospitalised in the neonatal intensive care unit is a stressful experience for parents. This experience is the result of exposure to different stressors related to the infant's condition, an alteration in parenting roles or the neonatal intensive care unit environment and staffing. These parents suffered negative psychological effects, experienced an interrupted development of a healthy parent-infant attachment and/or felt parental role alteration.

**Relevance to clinical practice.** The study's findings are crucial for neonatal intensive care unit nurses to develop intervention strategies and programmes that help parents to decrease the stress of their experience and to support them in facing this stressful situation.

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