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The real cost of having a premature or sick baby

There are 78,000 babies born too soon, too small or too sick in Britain each year. Alongside the fear and anxiety felt by their parents, is the reality of a hospital stay that can stretch from weeks into months and the financial strain this places on families.

In February 2014 Bliss published a report looking at the extra financial strain put on families when their baby is admitted to neonatal care. *It's not a game: the very real cost of having a premature or sick baby* found that parents faced spiralling costs averaging over £280 per week and almost two thirds of parents of infants admitted to neonatal care felt their mental health had worsened as a result of the financial burden.

Bliss surveyed over 1,300 parents and 178 hospitals in England, Scotland and Wales and will be producing a further report in the near future looking at Northern Ireland. The key findings of the report include:

- Parents of a baby admitted to neonatal care face extra costs amounting to £2,256 during their baby's stay in hospital, averaging £282 per week.
- Costs such as paying for food and drinks averaged £53 a week, while parents faced travel costs including petrol and parking averaging over £100 per week.
- Three quarters of parents reported that their household finances were worsened, while one in five couldn't afford to pay bills such as their rent or mortgage.
- The average stay in neonatal care was eight weeks. However, one in four babies and families faced 12 or more weeks in hospital and 5% faced a stay of over 20 weeks.
- Over half of the mothers surveyed felt their maternity leave was not long enough while many fathers were forced back to work or had to take unpaid leave.
- Alongside the financial burden is a cost to parent's health, with almost two thirds of parents reporting that their mental health had worsened as a result of the extra pressure.
- Welsh and Scottish hospitals offer free parking^{1,2}. In England, 87% of hospitals provide free parking for the parents of premature or sick babies, however two thirds of parents reported that they paid for parking, as they were not told they could access it for free or at a reduced rate.

Many hospitals across Britain are leading the way in doing all they can to support parents and Bliss has included examples in the report of simple steps that make a big difference. These

include ensuring all parents are supplied with information on where to go for support, giving meal vouchers, offering free supervised childcare for siblings and providing free parking. In the longer-term, having somewhere to stay near their baby, one of the Bliss Baby Charter standards³, would bring an end to expensive daily commutes to the hospital. This would enable parents to maximise the time they spend caring for their baby.

Bliss will continue to work with units to support them in all they do for premature and sick babies and their families, including working together to develop information and resources for parents to help with the extra costs they face. Parents should be provided with a welcome pack on arrival at the neonatal unit including information on the support available to them with accommodation, parking, transport and food.

It is well known that infants have better outcomes and are often discharged to home earlier when their parents are with them and helping to care for them while they are in neonatal care. The benefits are far reaching if supporting families both financially and emotionally is included in family-centred care.

Other recommendations in the Bliss report include extended maternity leave and pay for the parents of premature and sick babies, as well as the publication of advice for employers on supporting them. The average return journey for parents taking part in the survey was 27 miles; Bliss is calling for reimbursement of costs for parents travelling more than 20 miles to see their baby in hospital.

To see a copy of the report visit www.bliss.org.uk.

References

1. **The Scottish Government.** *Hospital Parking Charges*. [Online] 2008. Available from: www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2008/09/02091611 [Accessed 28 February 2014].
2. **NHS Wales.** *Reform of Hospital Parking Charges Announced*. [Online] 2008. Available from: www.wales.nhs.uk/news/9285 [Accessed 28 February 2014].
3. **Bliss.** *The Bliss Baby Charter Standards*. Bliss: London, 2011.

