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Under-resourced transport services for the UK's sickest infants: new Bliss research

“I was not able to travel with either of my twins. It was very emotional to see them strapped inside the travel incubator... The hospital hired a private neonatal ambulance to transport one twin because the NHS neonatal ambulance had to cover an emergency.”

This experience, recounted to Bliss by a mother of twins born at 29 weeks' gestation, is just one example of the real-life impact that the under-resourcing of neonatal transport services can have on premature or sick infants. Neonatal transport services are a vital part of their care, ensuring they can be moved quickly to access the right care in the right place for their often complex needs, and therefore play a major role in their chances of survival and then going on to thrive. However, Bliss' new report, *Transfers of premature and sick babies*,¹ shows that these essential services are often under-staffed, under-resourced and sometimes only able to operate in daylight hours.

Our research found that there is wide variation in transport services for infants across the UK and many services do not have the resources they need to meet national safety and quality standards. Premature and sick infants are being failed by the lack of funding that is a major cause of these gaps in services. Bliss found that:

- Eight out of nine neonatal transport services were unable to meet the NHS standard for time-critical transfers, which states that in 95% of cases they should set off within one hour of receiving a call. This is a serious cause for concern as time-critical cases are, by definition, those when an infant urgently needs specialist care
- There are nearly 1,000 transfers of infants every year in the UK because of a lack of capacity in neonatal units
- One in four neonatal transport services in the UK does not have a dedicated transfer team at night, leaving vulnerable infants reliant on neighbouring services or busy hospital staff
- There is currently no access to air transport for the smallest and sickest infants who need a heated incubator in England
- In a one-week snapshot, half of neonatal transport services in the UK reported staffing gaps.

There are currently 13 regional neonatal transport services in England, two in Wales, one in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. Between

them they carry out 16,000 transfers of premature and sick infants each year.

Specialist transport services are integral to the delivery of a high quality neonatal service, allowing infants to be cared for in the right place, as close to home as possible. There has been good progress in developing these services in the past 15 years, but there is still much to do so that all services can provide consistent, safe, high quality care.

Based on the report's findings, Bliss' recommendations include:

- Governments and the UK's health services must ensure that all neonatal transport services have the funding they need to provide a 24-hour service with dedicated road vehicles, sufficient for the population they serve
- Health education bodies responsible for education and training, together with the relevant Royal Colleges, should put medium- to long-term plans in place to address the national skills shortage
- Neonatal services should ensure that all parents are as involved as much as possible if their baby needs to be transferred.

Currently, some of the sickest infants have to wait much longer than they should to reach the appropriate level of neonatal unit for vital care. This has serious implications for them and also



for their families at what is already an extremely stressful and difficult time.

Investment is urgently needed to address national skills shortages across all neonatal services, including specialist transport, so that every infant has the best chance of survival and quality of life.

Parents of premature and sick infants tell us how much they appreciate the committed, hard-working staff who do their best to provide high quality care, however even parents, like the mother quoted above, recognise that these professionals are being pushed to their limits.

Bliss is campaigning hard for more funding for neonatal services, including transport; this new report is part of a series, following our flagship *Bliss Baby Report: Hanging in the Balance* published in October 2015,² which highlighted that neonatal units across England are overstretched, under-staffed and being pushed beyond their capacity.

We need urgent action from governments and the health service bodies to address the funding and resourcing of all neonatal services.

Bliss will be reporting on the challenges facing services in Wales and Scotland later in 2016 and next year in Northern Ireland. In the meantime, you can stay updated about all of our campaigns and policy reports by joining Bliss' online campaign network at bliss.org.uk/forms/action-for-bliss-2015.

References

1. **Bliss.** *Transfers of Premature and Sick Babies*. 2016 [Online]. Available at: www.bliss.org.uk/news/transport-services-for-uks-sickest-babies-severely-under-resourced [Accessed 13 June 2016].
2. **Bliss.** *Bliss Baby Report: Hanging in the Balance*. 2015 [Online]. Available at: www.bliss.org.uk/babyreport [Accessed 13 June 2016].



With thanks to the London Ambulance Service for kindly providing this photograph.

Bliss needs your help

Bliss
for babies born
premature or sick

Bliss, the charity for babies born premature or sick, is looking for expert reviewers to help with upcoming developments in neonatal research and information creation. The two newly-created panels need neonatal health professionals to help achieve Bliss' new research strategy and to also assess the information the charity provides for parents.

As part of the charity's new strategy, it is looking to expand



support for research in neonatal care to tangibly improve outcomes for babies.

The **Research Panel** will use the experience of expert health professionals to comment on, review and inform the research Bliss supports and the ways in which it provides that support.

Bliss provides information for families in the form of online and printed resources, videos and posters.

The charity is beginning a thorough review of all the information it currently produces, working to update the content included as well as the ways it reaches parents.

The **Content Review Panel** will consist of public and health professional members, ensuring accurate and relevant guidance is created in ways that will reach every family of every baby born premature or sick in the UK.

To get involved with Bliss' research and information strategies visit:

• **Bliss Research Panel**

www.bliss.org.uk/get-involved-with-research

• **Bliss Content Review Panel**

www.bliss.org.uk/get-involved-with-our-publications