

14th World Pediatrics & Neonatal Healthcare Conference

September 11-12, 2017 Los Angeles, CA, USA

<http://pediatrics.cmesociety.com>

NICU design: The next generation

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Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) design has been evolving significantly in response to continuing research on neonatal care. Most recently, the Single-Family Room (SFR) has gained broad acceptance to improve the physical environment for the infant, resulting in better sleep based on enhanced control of light and sound, and increased family involvement thanks to sleeping accommodations for parents. While this has led to meaningful improvement for neonates over the open ward-style model, there is room for continued innovation. At Memorial Children's Hospital in South Bend, Indiana, the design team established goals to expand the SFR's clinical functionality and family accommodation, and to extend innovation to support staff in this high-intensity care environment. Many resulting changes were implemented in Memorial Children's new 39-bed NICU design that may set the standard for the next-generation NICU. SFRs include evidence-based design features that promote health, wellness and family participation in care. Windows and daylight in every room help maintain circadian rhythms for the child, parents and staff, providing a sense of normalcy and greater comfort than in the previous, crowded NICU model; a family area with a toilet room and shower supports longer stays. A new prototype, the extended family room, was also developed to accommodate additional care scenarios that require a larger room, such as multiple births; hospice care; super-critical babies too fragile to move; and couplet care for post-partum mothers-facilitating early bonding, which has typically been limited during the neonate's first few days of life.

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Pediatrics & Neonatal Healthcare 2017

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