

For all parents who come to NICU

My name is Carl Anderson, my little girl was born on Wednesday 14th April 2010 at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and was admitted to NICU the very same day. I didn't even have a chance to hold her in my arms.

If you are reading this then you are in the same position I was in; scared, overwhelmed with so many emotions, and trying to seek solace from the newspaper clippings and other case studies that adorn the walls of the NICU ward.

You have probably had doctors and nurses trying to explain long words that you have never heard of before, and you are no doubt desperately looking for comfort from anyone or anything that can assure you that your little baby is going to be ok.

I write this letter in the hope that you might be able to take some reassurance from it, because I know that during this crucial time you will be looking for something positive to cling on to.

Daisy was 2 weeks overdue and suffered from MAS – Meconium Aspiration Syndrome. It was explained to me that this meant that she had inhaled some meconium (sterile poo as I understood it) during labour. I was told that often babies become distressed during labour and can pass meconium and swallow it; in Daisy's case she was so distressed that she began to breath heavily and as a result inhaled a mixture of meconium and amniotic fluid, which passed into her lung.

This sticky substance blocked the veins to her lung and caused severe breathing difficulties, she was whisked from her mother's arms to Hinchingsbrooke, transported via the ANTS (Acute Neonatal Transport Service) direct to Addenbrookes and was immediately put on a ventilator in the NICU ward to help her breath.

I had never seen such a scary sight in all my life as I saw on that first night – a myriad of wires, a multitude of bleeping machines, and a spaghetti junction of nurses and doctors crossing my path. My partner and I were overwhelmed by it all. We had no idea of whether little Daisy would ever be ok, we were just told to stay strong and let the NICU team do their jobs.

That first night was torture, we hardly slept a wink as we felt completely helpless. I still didn't feel like a proper daddy at this point as I couldn't comfort and protect my little one.

The days that followed consisted of listening to the nurses, supporting my partner and trying my hardest to stay strong for my family.

If this letter strikes a cord with you, if you can identify at all with any of the above, or if you just need to hear some advice from somebody that doesn't have an NHS badge, then please take heed of my advice below ...

1. **SLEEP!** Don't feel guilty because you're not holding a bedside vigil next to your little one all day and all night. You won't be able to take in information about your baby if you're struggling to keep your eyes open. Soon you'll be the one taking care of your child and you'll need to be strong and alert to do that.
2. **EAT!** Same as above, how can you look after your little one when the team have worked their magic if you're too weak to stand up! Get your 5 a day anyway you can – we always kept fruit in the fridge and always made sure we left the NICU to visit the food hall downstairs. Jacket potatoes and pasta pots are cheap enough and will give you much needed energy, even Burger King will help provide the fats and sugars you need to keep going.

3. DRINK! The ward is so warm and dry that you'll need to be drinking so much fluid to keep your mouth from drying up! Keep a bottle of water in the fridge at all times, it's a god send!
4. TRUST the team here, watch how calm and unphased they are, see how closely they monitor and record every aspect of your baby's condition. The guys in NICU are only human, most are parents themselves and will know what you are going through. NEVER feel like they are judging you in any way, you may feel like that because you may feel you are not doing enough, but don't worry, your time of sleepless nights are just around the corner!
5. KNOW that you are not the only person that has felt the emotions that you are feeling now. Read the stories of how babies born not much bigger than a pound have grown into healthy little tykes running around (like the one I am looking at now!).
6. TALK to your partner, share every emotion you feel and once this ordeal is over you will be rock solid as a result. Cry together, laugh together if it helps, whatever strange emotion you feel share it. There is also a counsellor on site that will give you emotional support; it makes sense to use all services the ward offers.
7. IGNORE the beeps! You will think the team is ignoring your baby if they don't come running over when it chimes! They are not! Often these beeps are just prompts for the nurse that a monitoring lead has come loose from your baby, probably because the feisty little nipper has pulled it away! These are not critical and often just require a new sticky patch to keep it in place. As Adrienne (one of the nurses on NICU) told us: "If I don't panic, then you don't panic" (and they never panic!) – because performing miracles is what they do. Every single day.
8. BE PATIENT! The nurses will refrain from telling you on your first day that your baby is going to be ok, and they won't give you a definite date that you can take your baby home, it would be rash of them to do so as they haven't had time to see how your baby is doing. Let them monitor the situation, as often they will gradually introduce or gradually wean your baby off different drugs. It's a slow process, but it's that way for a reason.
9. UNDERSTAND what condition your baby has, the NICU website was a real therapy for us – it shows you what each machine does, it has the medical explanation for your baby's condition and it can help you to learn what you can do to help your baby come through this. www.cuh.org.uk/rosie.

I hope you can seek comfort in this letter, just as my partner and I did when we read the stories of other parents that had written in to express their thanks. I wish your child a speedy recovery.

