

So you want to be ... a neonatologist

Neonatology is a relatively new and rapidly expanding speciality. Traditionally a subspecialty of paediatrics, the first Certificate of Completion of Specialist Training in neonatal medicine was awarded in 1997 and consultants in neonatology now practise wholly within a neonatal intensive care service.

The overall birth rate in the UK has been rising since 2001 bringing with it a rapidly increasing workload. The incidence of extremely preterm birth is also increasing (Yeane et al, 2009). Survival of preterm babies has improved significantly with infants born in the UK at 24 and 25 weeks' gestation having survival rates approaching 50% (Costeloe et al, 2000). This improvement in outcome for babies born at the threshold of viability has had considerable impact on health-care resources and on the physicians responsible for their care. The development of organized clinical networks (Department of Health, 2007) has allowed a structured approach to patient care, professional training and research.

What is neonatology?

Neonatologists look after babies needing varying levels of care, from intensive care to management of complex problems on the postnatal ward. The team is truly multidisciplinary liaising with obstetricians, fetal medicine specialists, clinical geneticists and other paediatric subspecialists.

Attending difficult deliveries requires expertise and confidence in resuscitation techniques specific to the newborn infant. Stabilization and transportation of the hypoxic term newborn or extremely preterm infant needs detailed understanding of normal physiological changes and disease processes in the infant. Competence and skill in practical and diagnostic procedures

as well as ongoing medical management are essential. The neonatologist coordinates the management of respiratory, cardiovascular, metabolic and renal pathologies, often as a lone physician in the acute phase of care.

Long-term support for recovering sick infants requires attention to infection risks, nutrition and, importantly, neuromuscular development. Outpatient follow up and integration of the patient into community teams is a vital part of the neonatologist's role in continuing management. A good neonatologist should be able to share expertise efficiently and assume responsibilities for teaching, leadership and management (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2008). Communication skills, empathy and humility are vital.

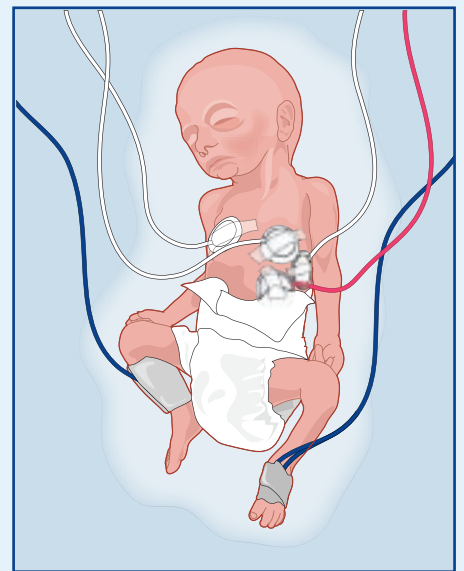
Training

Some foundation programmes will offer exposure to neonatal medicine. This is followed by a three-tier framework. Level 1 encompasses 3 years of core training in paediatrics which will give 6 months of neonatal medicine. During this time trainees should obtain their collegiate membership examination. Level 2 trainees will have increased exposure to neonatology and will be practising as middle grades. In the fifth year, ST5 equivalent trainees can apply for subspecialty training in neonatology, in parallel with applications to the national training grid for neonatology. The grid enables trainees to compete for posts in national training programmes in neonatology on an annual basis. Upon completion of training, successful trainees will be awarded a certificate of completion of training in neonatal medicine. The Royal college provides competency frameworks and assessment standards which focus on desired outcomes at each level of training.

At all levels work patterns are shift based, providing flexibility in training and allowing for less than full-time training.

Is it for you?

Do you thrive on the adrenalin-fuelled crash call or are the intricacies of highly complicated medical dilemmas more your



style? Either way neonatology is for you. Neonatologists need clinical knowledge and expertise in both acute and chronic clinical areas, and aptitude for practical and therapeutic procedures. The value of multidisciplinary working and a patient- or family-centred approach must be recognized. Prioritization of your own workload and understanding of clinical risk management are essential. To progress the neonatologist must pursue a career that develops through continued learning and research to improve clinical standards of care. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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KEY POINTS

- Neonatology offers a broad spectrum of clinical opportunity from intensive care to multidisciplinary outpatient follow up.
- Evidence-based practise and scope for academic or research is increasing and actively encouraged.
- Managed clinical networks give a structured framework to enhance quality of care.
- Neonatology is a dynamic young speciality which is changing rapidly and working towards clinical excellence at all levels. It is immensely rewarding.

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