



Patient Information Service  
**Psychological health services**

# Psychological support for families in the paediatric intensive care unit

## Bristol Royal Hospital for Children



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## **Why is there a clinical psychologist in the paediatric intensive care unit (PICU)?**

There is a clinical psychologist in PICU because when a child is critically ill, it can be a very stressful and frightening time for everyone in the family. For children in PICU, being unwell in an unfamiliar environment can be confusing, upsetting and frustrating. We know from research that children and their parents are vulnerable to experiencing emotional difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress reactions, after a stay in PICU. The clinical psychologist has an important role within the team to help to minimise distress for parents and children, both during the admission and for the future.

## **What are common experiences for parents of young people who are in PICU?**

Each parent will react differently to their child being on PICU. Many parents report that one of the hardest things about being in PICU is the feeling of being helpless. Some parents describe feeling overwhelmed by difficult emotions at times. Other parents may feel numb or disbelieving; as if the distressing events are not really happening. Parents refer to feelings that change from day to day, often as their child's condition changes. Parents may talk about "good and bad days" or feeling that they are on an "emotional rollercoaster".

## **Other common concerns for parents on PICU are:**

- understanding medical terms and complicated medical equipment
- being away from home and other family members

- adjusting to their child's altered appearance
- fears associated with an uncertain future.

## **What are common concerns for young people in PICU?**

Many children on PICU are sedated, which can affect their memory. For example, they may not remember certain events or they may have confusing recollections of things which may not be real.

For children who are more awake on PICU, they can feel upset about being away from home and familiar people, worried about tests or procedures and they may have flashbacks about events surrounding admission (especially after unexpected accidents). Children may also feel frustrated and upset by a reduced ability to communicate due to their condition or treatment.

## **How can the clinical psychologist help me?**

All parents on PICU are offered the opportunity to meet with the clinical psychologist. Parents can choose whether or not they feel this will be useful. The psychologist can see parents individually or as a couple.

Most psychology sessions take place just off the ward in the 'quiet room'. If parents prefer to meet at the bedside, this is also fine. When children are discharged to wards at Bristol Royal Hospital for Children, the psychologist can provide some follow up to support families over this transition.

The psychologist meets with parents for varying lengths of time according to parents' needs and preferences. Some parents may meet for just a one-off session, other parents may decide more regular meetings over a longer period of time would be beneficial.

Often, the initial session involves talking about the events that led up to their child being admitted as well as current concerns for the child. After this, meeting with the psychologist can:

- provide parents with a place off the unit in which they can express and reflect on difficult, and often intense, emotions
- support parents in making sense of these complicated feelings
- learn strategies for easing the distress associated with difficult thoughts and feelings
- liaise with medical professionals to ensure parents have all the information they need in a format that is preferred by them
- provide a specialist intervention to help parents who are experiencing intrusive imagery or 'flashbacks' about events leading up to or during their child's admission (for example, a road traffic accident).

## **What other roles does the clinical psychologist have within the PICU?**

The psychologist works with staff on PICU, to increase their understanding of common psychological reactions for children and parents on PICU and to support staff in providing emotional care for families. The psychologist leads a weekly integrated care meeting with staff on PICU in which the emotional, social and medical concerns for children on PICU are discussed. The aim of the meeting is to ensure that families receive the best all-round care. The psychologist provides teaching for nurses on PICU as part of their training and professional development.

## **What happens to the information I share with the clinical psychologist?**

The clinical psychologist works as a member of the multidisciplinary team and communicates regularly with them to provide the best

care.

If there is something that you tell the psychologist that you do not want them to share with anyone other than their supervisor, please let them know. They will always try to make sure that information is then kept private or confidential.

However, if there is reason to think that there is a risk of harm to you or others, this information may need to be passed on to other people. The psychologist will talk to you about this first whenever possible.

The psychologist will keep their own notes about any conversations they have with you, which are kept securely and confidentially within psychological health services. These notes are to help the psychologist remember the details of the concerns you have discussed with them and the plans they have agreed with you. If you have any concerns, or want to know more about the information that is likely to be shared about your child's care, please talk to the psychologist.

## **How can I arrange to see the clinical psychologist?**

If you would like to meet with the PICU psychologist, please let any member of PICU staff know. They will contact the psychologist who will come to PICU to introduce themselves and to arrange a convenient time to meet.

To contact the psychologist directly, you can call: 0117 342 8168.

## **What if I am not satisfied with the service that I receive?**

If you have concerns about the service you receive from the psychologist, please discuss these first with the psychologist or another member of the PICU team. If this does not address your concerns, please contact the head of psychological health services,

Sue Dolby. You can contact her by telephone on 0117 342 8168. Or you can call the patient support and complaints team, which can be reached on 0117 342 1050.



Please note that if for any reason you would value a second opinion concerning your diagnosis or treatment, you are entirely within your rights to request this.

The first step would usually be to discuss this with the doctor or other lead clinician who is responsible for your care.

As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit:  
[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation)  
or call the research and innovation team on  
0117 342 0233.

**For access to other patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:**

**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/)**

**Hospital Switchboard: 0117 923 0000**



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