The Need for Neonatal End of Life Care in Saudi Arabia: Proposed Guidelines

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Introduction

Neonatal end-of-life care is an extensive care for an infant who is not going to ‘get better’. It is a team approach that aims to relieve the physical, psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual suffering of the dying infant and the family. The role of the staff members of neonatal end-of-life care is to support with dignity the infant’s time on earth and support the family’s experience with empathy and culturally sensitive respect.

Objective

Our objective was to thoroughly evaluate the need for the introduction of neonatal end-of-life care in KSA shedding lights on the possible challenges that may hinder its implementation in the Saudi national hospitals. We aimed to construct a protocol consisting of proposed guidelines on how to properly apply neonatal end-of-life care in KSA.

Methodology

We reviewed publications retrieved through a PubMed search using relevant keywords, combined with the “related articles” function and a manual search of the references of the retrieved articles. Also, interviews with some experts in the field were used in gathering the data.

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i. Advances in obstetric and neonatal care have resulted in increased survival in premature infants.

ii. Rates of consanguinity which are much higher in this part of the world, the advanced maternal age and the lack of genetic counseling programs all have led to higher incidences of fatal congenital anomalies.

iii. Lethal malformations led to death in 36%, prematurity and its complications in 42% of the 526 neonatal deaths in Riyadh Military Hospital from January 1995 until December 2004.

iv. Peculiarities of the Saudi society due to the cultural, traditional and religious beliefs have also stressed the urgent demand for neonatal end-of-life care.

Challenges to Implementing Neonatal End-of-Life Care in Saudi Arabia

Challenges of End-of-Life Care in general in Saudi Arabia:
• Most of the End of Life Care providers are western (different culture, religion...).
• The poor availability of Opioids at the national level.
• Limited educational programs targeting nurses, doctors, pharmacists and other allied health professionals in order to establish a broad knowledge base of end-of-life care

Challenges experienced by other countries that have already implemented Neonatal End of Life Care:
• Inadequate staffing to support end-of-life care practice
• Difficult communication with parents of dying neonates
• Conflicts among providers around end-of-life decision making
• There are no yet clear guidelines about end-of-life care in newborns which may lead to inconsistency in its application

Conclusion

It has been clear that there is an urgent need for the implementation of neonatal end-of-life care in Saudi Arabia. However, prior to the provision of this service, a thorough understanding of the different challenges and recommendations reported in the literature is highly suggested.