



Lived Experiences of Intensive Care Unit Nurses on Neonatal Care

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Abstract : The study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of intensive care unit nurses on neonatal care using Van Manen's (2023) phenomenological method. Rigor was established through validation and verification. A purposive sample of seven (7) Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) nurses was interviewed. Results revealed that NICU nurses' experiences on neonatal care included (1) Realities in the NICU setting, which are the challenges they face, emotional strain, and the importance of teamwork and collaboration. Their means of coping with the challenges and how it affected their personal and professional life centered on (2) Resilience and Growth in the NICU setting, which were fostered through support systems and communication, self-care and reflection, professional growth, and lifelong learning. Through their experiences and coping mechanisms, (3) the insights they gained and shared centered on finding purpose and integrity, demonstrated through compassion and fulfillment, accountability and responsibility, and communicating with care. Lastly, (4) to manage difficulties, NICU nurses strategize by advancing their excellence through strategic and prioritized care delivery, informed decision-making, and continuous capacity building. These findings underscore the complex nature of NICU nursing, highlighting how lived experiences shape not only clinical competence but also personal growth and professional commitment. Ultimately, the study sheds light on the transformative journey of NICU nurses as they navigate the intricacies of neonatal care with resilience, purpose, and excellence.

Keywords: *Health, Lived Experience, Neonatal Intensive Care Phenomenological, Tagum City*

I. INTRODUCTION

Beyond their clinical duties, NICU nurses also provide families with emotional support during what is often a traumatic and uncertain time. Their exposure to extreme cases of neonatal illness and premature birth deeply shapes their emotional responses and professional identities (Venkatasubramanian, Ranalli, Kirupaharan, Solanki, & Mankodiya, 2023). These experiences, while offering valuable insights into neonatal care, also place them at high risk for emotional burnout and compassion fatigue. Globally, neonatal mortality remains a serious public health concern, with approximately 2.5 million infant deaths recorded annually (Rosa-Mangeret, Benski, Golaz, Zala, Kyokan, Wagner, & Pfister, 2022). In many low- and middle-income countries, high mortality rates are linked to underfunded healthcare systems, limited access to neonatal training, and a shortage of competent healthcare providers (Bolan, Cowgill, Walker, Kak, Shaver, Moxon, & Lincetto, 2021). Despite medical progress, neonates remain among the most vulnerable populations worldwide (Dhage & Nagtode, 2024). It points out the global demand for trained intensive care unit nurses who can effectively manage serious newborn diseases (Dudding, Bordelon, Sanders, Shorten, Wood, & Watts, 2022).

Although nursing is widely recognized as a demanding profession, neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) nurses face particularly intense challenges due to the critical nature of their responsibilities. These nurses specialize in the care of vulnerable newborns who require continuous monitoring and advanced medical interventions (Wang, Ma, Meng, & Zhou, 2021). Neonatal care plays a crucial role in healthcare systems, as it involves managing the complex medical needs of preterm, underweight, or critically ill infants (Obeagu, Abdirahman, Bunu, & Obeagu, 2023). As such, NICU nurses operate in emotionally and physically taxing environments where their actions significantly impact infant survival and recovery. Understanding their lived experiences is essential for improving their professional well-being and ensuring the highest quality of neonatal care (Carton, Steinhardt, & Cordwell, 2022). In the Philippines, neonatal care is further challenged by insufficient healthcare infrastructure and a limited number of specialized providers. According to Ferdohleb and Berdaga (2022), infant and under-five mortality rates remain between 30 to 50 per 1,000 live births—figures significantly higher than those in neighboring Asian countries. While government initiatives have attempted to address this by providing essential healthcare packages, many hospitals still lack adequately trained NICU nurses capable of delivering high-quality care to critically ill neonates (Cagayan, Nisperos, Balahadia-Mortel, & Castro, 2022). Moreover, NICU nurses work for the most part in high-pressure and resource-constrained conditions, making their duties challenging (Cruz, Barrion, Llanes, Abdula, & Fallorina, 2023). Furthermore, uncertainty surrounds many areas of neonatal care, such as assessment in the early stages, proper management, and emotional factors (Limacher, Fauchère, Gubler, & Hendriks, 2023). These realities highlight the urgent need to examine how NICU nurses navigate such challenges in order to improve both care delivery and workforce resilience.

Although previous research has contributed to the understanding of NICU settings, many studies have focused on medical interventions or parental perspectives, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding the lived experiences of NICU nurses themselves (Franck, Bisgaard, Cormier, Hutchison, Moore, Gay, & Lare, 2022). Given their frontline role in neonatal care, it is critical to examine how NICU nurses cope with stress, manage uncertainty, and sustain their professional performance. Addressing this research gap, the present study explored the lived experiences of NICU nurses to provide insights into their challenges, coping strategies, and emotional resilience. These findings aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in neonatal nursing and may inform future training programs, support current management strategies, and institutional policies to strengthen neonatal care outcomes.

Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following questions.

1. What are the lived experiences of ICU nurses on neonatal care?
2. How do the nurses cope with the challenges of NICU work, and how has it affected their life personally and professionally?
3. What insights can these nurses share with other nurses?
4. What strategies do NICU nurses employ to manage difficulties in neonatal care?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Understanding Neonatal Care and NICU Work

Infancy is a vital stage of rapid development, requiring comprehensive care, especially for newborns with medical conditions (Arterberry & Bornstein, 2023). Neonatal care, a branch of pediatrics, focuses on monitoring, treatment, and support to ensure newborn health (Negarandeh et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). Many of these infants are preterm or have congenital disorders, making them highly vulnerable to complications (Karnati, Kollikonda, & Abu-Shaweesh, 2020).

Advancements in Neonatal Care. Neonatal care has progressed significantly in recent years through innovations in technology and clinical practices. As newborns are highly vulnerable, they require precise medical attention during their early weeks of life (Rogers et al., 2021). Advances such as improved equipment, life-saving interventions, and better diagnostics have greatly increased survival rates and transformed the landscape of newborn care (Young, 2024).

Development, Milestones, and Impact. Technological advances have greatly improved neonatal outcomes, particularly for preterm and critically ill newborns (Mornioli et al., 2023). NICU care has evolved with innovations like non-contact vital monitoring, advanced ventilation, rapid genome sequencing, and standardized protocols (Biban et al., 2021). Despite these improvements, infant mortality persists, often due to preventable complications related to obstetric conditions (Marinelli, Lyden, & Peeples, 2020).

Roles of Professionals. Neonatal care is complex, requiring a multidisciplinary team to address issues like preterm birth, low birth weight, and congenital disorders (Thomson et al., 2020; Ghosh & Wojtowycz, 2021). Effective care relies on collaboration among neonatologists, nurses, therapists, and other specialists. Key traits of successful teams include competence, communication, trust, and mutual respect (Elkington, 2023).

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) provides critical care for premature and seriously ill newborns using advanced equipment like ventilators and incubators (Suresh-Kumar & Kercz, 2021). It addresses conditions such as low birth weight, infections, and congenital malformations (Grunberg, Vranceanu, & Lerou, 2022). A multidisciplinary team—neonatologists, nurses, and allied specialists—ensures individualized care (Elkington, 2023). Family-centered care in the NICU encourages parental involvement and emotional support (Loutfy et al., 2024). Ultimately, the NICU serves as a vital bridge toward recovery and home readiness (Davidson, 2020).

Realities of Nurses in the NICU Setting

While the NICU showcases medical progress, it also presents intense emotional and ethical challenges for nurses. They face stress from caring for critically ill newborns and supporting families in crisis (Sakai et al., 2024). Their role demands constant vigilance, rapid decision-making, and emotional resilience (Friedrich, 2021). Ethical dilemmas, especially around end-of-life care and uncertain prognoses, often lead to moral distress (Ma et al., 2024; Mills & Cortezzo, 2020). These pressures significantly affect their mental well-being, highlighting the need for strong support systems.

Despite these challenges, NICU nurses often experience personal and professional growth. Coping strategies like peer support, mindfulness, and reflection help them manage the demands of their work (Hurley, 2021). Many find deep purpose in seeing newborns recover, which strengthens their dedication (Sodowick, 2023; Ramos, 2020). Over time, they develop from novices to skilled experts in neonatal care (Cypress, 2024). These dual experiences reveal the complexity of their role—marked by both hardship and fulfillment.

Challenges and Uncertainties in Neonatal Care

Despite the NICU's technological advances, uncertainty remains a constant and complex element of neonatal care. It stems from ambiguous symptoms, limited data, rare conditions, and the fragile nature of newborns (Utrecht, 2023; Tonelli, 2020). Medical, ethical, and emotional uncertainties often arise, impacting clinical decision-making and treatment outcomes (Mackintosh & Armstrong, 2020). Newborns frequently present with overlapping or unclear symptoms, making diagnosis and prognosis difficult (Harris et al., 2020).

Healthcare professionals must navigate preterm births, congenital issues, and infections with limited clarity on long-term outcomes (Ghosh & Wojtowycz, 2021). They face not only clinical uncertainty but also ethical dilemmas involving parental consent and end-

of-life decisions (Young, 2020). The emotional burden of supporting vulnerable infants and families adds to the challenge, often leading to emotional strain (Haward et al., 2022). In this environment, uncertainty influences nearly every aspect of neonatal care.

Resilience and Growth in the NICU Setting

To navigate the many challenges in neonatal care, NICU nurses and healthcare providers rely on a variety of coping strategies. Common medical issues include preterm birth, low birth weight, respiratory distress syndrome, congenital anomalies, and infections—each presenting distinct diagnostic and treatment challenges (Venkatasubramanian et al., 2023). The unpredictability of neonatal conditions further complicates care.

Beyond clinical difficulties, providers also face ethical and emotional stressors, such as making end-of-life decisions, balancing pain management, and determining the extent of life-sustaining interventions. The extreme vulnerability of newborns amplifies the emotional weight of these decisions. As such, training in emotional resilience and ethical decision-making is essential to support healthcare professionals in this demanding environment (Grunberg et al., 2022).

Coping mechanism. Uncertainty in the NICU can cause significant cognitive and emotional strain for nurses, often leading to heightened anxiety, impaired decision-making, and avoidance behaviors (Voultos, Deligianni, & Tsamadou, 2022). To manage these pressures, NICU nurses employ various coping strategies, drawing on clinical expertise, teamwork, and resilience (Tajari, Ashktorab, & Ebadi, 2024). Effective care in this setting depends on professionals who are competent, ethical, respectful, and accountable to one another, fostering a collaborative environment that helps reduce neonatal complications (Lesao, Rabie, Lubbe, & Scholtz, 2024).

These coping mechanisms, supported by safety-oriented organizational structures and strong communication practices, enable nurses to navigate complex clinical scenarios while providing family-centered care. Ultimately, such strategies help both caregivers and families manage stress and make informed decisions in uncertain and high-pressure situations (Maleki et al., 2022).

Decision-Making. Neonatal intensive care nurses use various decision-making structures to guide their practice. A key approach is shared decision-making, which involves collaboration between families and healthcare providers (Elkington, 2023). Clinical best practices and protocols provide evidence-based guidelines to support decisions using current data (Jaksa et al., 2021). Ethical decision-making frameworks help nurses navigate moral principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, ensuring care aligns with ethical standards (Chen & Drago, 2023). These frameworks also assist in addressing competing values, cultural differences, and resource limitations through a patient-centered ethical lens (Hansson & Froding, 2021).

In summary, neonatal care, while technologically advanced and medically sophisticated, remains a field deeply marked by emotional, ethical, and professional complexity. NICU nurses navigate these realities through a combination of clinical expertise, personal resilience, and structured coping strategies. These insights provide a strong foundation for exploring the lived experiences of NICU nurses in this study, particularly how they confront challenges, maintain professional integrity, and grow within their practice.

Theoretical Framework

In order to capture a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of intensive care unit nurses in newborn care, this study combines two important theories, which are Benner's Theory of Novice to Expert (Benner, 2021) and Watson's Theory of Human Caring (Watson & Woodland, 2020). Benner states that there are five stages in a nurse's career progression: novice, advanced beginning, competent, proficient, and expert. While inexperienced nurses follow rigid rules and regulations, the expert nurses understand circumstances instinctively and deliver effective, patient-centered care. This highlights the significance of experience and lessons learned in therapeutic practice is emphasized by this idea (Benner, 2021). This is complemented by Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring, which emphasizes caring as a key component of healthcare and concentrates on the humanistic components of nursing (Gunawan et al., 2022). Watson's approach emphasizes the nurse's responsibility to foster an atmosphere that is sympathetic, encouraging, and conducive to healing and emotional health for patients and their families (Ikeh et al., 2024). These ideas work together to offer a dual viewpoint on the emotional and technical aspects of nursing practice.

Using Benner's theory, this study investigates how ICU nurses gain knowledge of newborn care via their personal experiences. It aids in framing their development from learning procedures to being proficient in providing intuitive, context-sensitive care under pressure. Conversely, Watson's theory is used to comprehend the humanistic and emotional difficulties that intensive care unit nurses have, such as helping families and developing deep relationships with critically sick newborns. By integrating these theories, the study examines how intensive care unit nurses balance technical proficiency with compassionate care, pointing out areas that could be enhanced in terms of training, policies, and support systems to enhance patient outcomes and professional growth in neonatal intensive care units.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Presented in this chapter are the methods that include research design, setting, participants, measure, ethical considerations, procedure, statistical tool, and scope and limitation of the study that were used in this study.

Participants

A total of 7 registered nurses currently working in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) in Davao Del Norte province, Philippines. Inclusion criteria include at least one year of professional experience as a registered nurse working in newborn care units, which gives the necessary knowledge and skill in the NICU operations. Participants should work at tertiary hospitals, secondary hospitals, or community health clinics to experience a variety of healthcare settings. To ensure that only NICU-specific experiences are included in the study, participants from general pediatrics, obstetrics, and other neonatal-related departments outside of critical care settings would be excluded. This sample will be sufficient to offer diverse yet thorough insights into their lived experiences while allowing for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Design

This study utilizes Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology as the research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) nurses. Hermeneutic phenomenology interprets the deeper meanings of human experience, and hence it can be said that this approach is best for studying the complex realities surrounding the NICU nurses (Van Manen, 2023). This design is not merely to describe phenomena but also endeavors to interpret how individuals conceive and make sense of experiences within their professional context. Because of this qualitative approach taken, the study aligns with the holistic nature of nursing practice, which focuses on the integration of these physical, emotional, and situational dimensions of care (Frechette, 2020; Santiago et al., 2020).

Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology has been widely recognized in nursing research for its ability to capture various insights into a complex phenomenon, contributing significantly to the body of knowledge within the profession of nursing. By using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology in this study, the narratives of NICU nurses will be discussed in greater detail, highlighting the difficulties, coping strategies, and comprehension of newborn care. This design provides a framework that is both flexible and organized for exploring the subtleties and specifics of their functions (Mascellaro, 2024).

Setting

This study will be conducted in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) in Tagum City, Davao Del Norte province, in Region XI of the Philippines. It encompasses tertiary hospitals, secondary hospitals, and community health clinics offering newborn critical care services. This will ensure that the study captures a broad range of healthcare settings where nurses deliver care to critically ill newborns. Every location will be chosen carefully to meet the standards of NICU care, and there will be an emphasis on institutions that can handle newborn crises as well as intense surveillance. The research will take place in professional and private contexts within the settings specified to ensure the comfort, privacy, and anonymity of participants during the data-gathering procedure.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings from in-depth interviews with neonatal healthcare providers, analyzed through a phenomenological lens to uncover recurring themes related to their experiences with uncertainty and coping strategies in neonatal care. The participants' voices are central, offering rich insights into the phenomenon.

The study involved semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with seven NICU nurses, each lasting 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Before each session, the researcher explained the study's purpose, voluntary participation, withdrawal rights, and confidentiality assurances.

Strict confidentiality and privacy protocols were followed. Transcripts and recordings were securely stored, and ethical standards were upheld by maintaining professional relationships and respecting participants' autonomy. Responses given in the local language were carefully translated into English, preserving original meanings. Thematic analysis of the data yielded four major themes and twelve cluster themes capturing the lived experiences of NICU nurses.

Further, for a better presentation of the discussion of their lived experiences, we opted to present it according to the research questions asked of the participants: (1) What are the lived experiences of ICU nurses on neonatal care, (2) How do the nurses cope with the challenges of NICU work, and how has it affected their life personally and professionally, (3) What insights can these nurses share with other nurses, and (4) What strategies do NICU nurses employ to manage difficulties in neonatal care. Results are presented in excerpts from the transcripts and were analyzed to answer the questions posed in this study.

Realities of Nurses in the NICU Setting

Nurses in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) work in a distinctive and emotionally intense environment within the healthcare system, where they observe the delicate nature of life every day. This segment delves into the experiences of NICU nurses as they deal with the ambiguities and challenges of neonatal care. Through comprehensive interviews, their testimonies offer a clear depiction of the emotional, psychological, and professional terrains they experience.

Research has shown that NICU nurses encounter a wide range of challenges, particularly in managing the emotional strain that comes with caring for critically ill neonates and supporting families during times of uncertainty and crisis (Sakai et al., 2024). In addition to emotional stress, these nurses frequently face ethical dilemmas related to end-of-life decisions, allocation of limited resources, and navigating complex communication with families when prognoses are unclear (Ma et al., 2024). According to Mills and Cortezzo (2020), moral distress is especially prevalent among NICU nurses when they are involved in care decisions that conflict with their personal values or when their professional integrity feels compromised. These emotional and ethical burdens significantly affect their mental well-being, underscoring the critical need for effective support systems within the NICU environment.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Requires heightened attentiveness due to newborns' limited ability to express needs, relying on cues like crying.	Challenges in the NICU Setting
Faces difficulty in understanding infants' needs due to their inability to verbally communicate.	

Participants highlighted the intensive care needed for preterm neonates, often requiring one-to-one or two-to-one nurse-to-patient ratios due to their vulnerability to complications (Karnati et al., 2020). Neonatal providers face complex challenges with conditions like preterm birth, low birth weight, and respiratory distress syndrome that complicate diagnosis and treatment (Ghosh & Wojtowycz, 2021). Diagnostic uncertainty is common, especially when symptoms overlap or are vague (Harris et al., 2020). Prognostic decisions are often made under uncertain conditions, particularly for severely ill or extremely preterm infants (Krick et al., 2020).

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Finds caring for critically ill neonates, especially during end-of-life care, to be emotionally taxing and difficult to articulate.	Emotional Strain
Experiences emotional difficulty and profound challenge in dealing with the loss of a neonate.	

NICU nurses face profound emotional challenges, especially during end-of-life care and patient loss. Deep attachments to patients and moral dilemmas create significant emotional burdens. While some nurses cope by focusing on positive outcomes, the emotional toll remains high. Healthcare systems must provide support to help nurses manage this stress, as their emotional resilience impacts both their well-being and the quality of care. Han, Min, and Kim (2022) note that moral distress arises when nurses feel unable to act on their ethical beliefs due to institutional limits, worsened by emotional ties and family conflicts. Rezaei, Nematollahi, and Asadi (2023) found that a supportive ethical climate with open communication and shared decision-making can reduce moral distress, while its absence increases emotional strain.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Recognizes the collaborative nature of decision-making in neonatal care, involving doctors, nurses, and parents.	Teamwork & Collaboration
Emphasizes the importance of collaboration and open communication between the healthcare team and family to explain and ensure understanding of medical practices.	

The participants stressed that neonatal care is a team effort involving doctors, nurses, and parents, with collaboration crucial for providing the best care. They noted that aligned teamwork significantly improves survival chances for fragile infants. Tajari et al. (2024) highlight that ICU nurses manage complex cases through combined expertise and teamwork. Research by Alipour et al. (2024) links effective collaboration among NICU staff to lower moral distress and reduced emotional pressure in this demanding environment.

Resilience and Growth in the NICU Setting

Practicing in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) exposes nurses to a demanding atmosphere, where the emotional burden of tending to seriously ill infants can significantly affect their personal and work lives. This research inquiry investigates not only the ways in which NICU nurses manage these everyday challenges but also how these strategies impact their general well-being, interpersonal relationships, job satisfaction, and sense of professional identity.

On a professional level, nurses in the NICU frequently face emotional fatigue, moral dilemmas, and the need to maintain accuracy. A recent study published in PubMed emphasized that enhancing resilience among NICU nurses significantly mitigates the impact of burnout. The researchers found that strengthening resilience, coupled with managerial support and positive collegial relationships, plays a crucial role in reducing job-related stress (Al-Harrasi et al., 2024). Additionally, Smith and Wolf (2018) identified resilience as a key leadership competency. They highlighted that fostering resilience not only supports nurse retention but also contributes to improved patient safety, family involvement, and overall quality outcomes in NICU care.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Relies on colleagues for emotional support during difficult times, enhancing coping strategies in the workplace.	Support Systems & Communication
Uses debriefing with fellow nurses as a coping mechanism to process experiences and relieve stress, fostering emotional resilience.	

These sentiments reflect NICU nurses' reliance on each other for both technical support and emotional reassurance, especially during critical cases or patient loss. Voultsos et al. (2022) note that uncertainty can cause cognitive and emotional strain, increasing anxiety and risk aversion, which may impair decision-making. Ayed (2024) found a strong positive link between emotional intelligence and coping mechanisms in NICU nurses, suggesting that enhancing emotional intelligence can improve coping and well-being.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Prioritizes rest and relaxation after shifts to recharge and restore energy, ensuring physical and emotional well-being.	Self-Care and Reflection
Engaging in reading and journaling provides an emotional outlet, helping to process challenges and reflect on personal experiences.	

Recent research shows that spiritual and reflective practices improve healthcare workers' well-being. Arasteh et al. (2025) found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy enhanced the spiritual well-being of mothers with NICU newborns, suggesting similar benefits for NICU staff. A scoping review by De Diego-Cordero et al. (2022) highlights meditation and quiet reflection as effective tools to reduce nurse burnout and build resilience. Nurses emphasize that managing emotional health is vital for staying present and empathetic to patients and families. Mindfulness-based self-care strengthens resilience and reduces compassion fatigue (Wei et al., 2025). Lary, Borimnejad, and Mardani-Hamooleh (2019) also report high burnout rates among NICU nurses and recommend targeted education and counseling to help manage stress, especially around patient deaths. Reflection promotes self-awareness and continuous professional growth.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Professional growth is facilitated through mentorship and self-reflection, allowing for the identification of areas for improvement and the development of necessary skills.	Professional Growth and Lifelong Learning
Adaptation is achieved through repetitive practice, enabling mastery of skills both personally and professionally.	

Neonatal care challenges nurses to develop sharp critical thinking and quick decision-making skills through continuous learning and daily practice. These demands help shape them into skilled, compassionate, and resilient professionals. Research shows that critical thinking training improves clinical decisions (Jalalpour et al., 2021), and NICU nurses benefit from being competent, ethical, and responsible (Lesao et al., 2024). Working in the NICU is more than a job—it's ongoing professional and personal growth. Training in coping and emotional support is essential to sustain their well-being and effectiveness (Grunberg et al., 2022).

Lessons and Insights for Fellow NICU Nurses

Nurses in the NICU encounter some of the most demanding and critical situations in healthcare, where each choice can significantly impact a newborn's survival. Yet, in addition to their clinical skills and technical know-how, these nurses cultivate a deep reservoir of insights derived from their personal experiences, influenced by the emotional highs and lows inherent in neonatal care. These insights provide important lessons that extend beyond daily tasks, reflecting the significant emotional and psychological development that occurs in such a challenging environment.

As NICU nurses handle the intricacies of critical situations, they establish coping mechanisms, boost their resilience, and develop a distinct form of empathy. The collective insights gained from their experiences, be it through reflections on conquering burnout, handling stress, or celebrating moments of success, act as a significant source of encouragement for their colleagues. These nurses provide actionable guidance, rooted in lived experiences, which can assist fellow practitioners in enhancing their skills and emotional health.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Genuine and precise care is essential in the NICU, where there is no margin for error.	Compassion and Fulfillment

NICU nursing is challenging but deeply rewarding. Nurses take pride in helping critically ill babies recover and providing compassionate, high-quality care, treating each infant like family. Despite the high-stress environment, many neonatal nurses experience compassion satisfaction and find their work meaningful (Lowe, Jakimowicz, Levett-Jones, & Demant, 2025). The profession offers personal and professional growth, fostering resilience and empathy (Lowe, Jakimowicz, & Levett-Jones, 2022). NICU nursing carries both pressure and privilege, with fulfillment found in even the smallest patient progress. Research highlights that empathy and attention to detail are vital, showing the profound impact nurses have on newborns and their families (Mishra, 2023).

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
The work is deeply rewarding, particularly when witnessing the progress of a newborn who overcame initial struggles.	Accountability & Responsibility
Working in the NICU demands courage, accountability, and a strong sense of responsibility due to the high stakes involved.	

Participants emphasized that each neonate has unique needs, requiring compassionate, individualized care consistent with Individualized Developmental Care (IDC). IDC encourages nurses to adapt care based on factors like gestational age and medical history (Brandon & McGrath, 2017). Effective communication among NICU staff is crucial for patient safety and quality care, as communication barriers can compromise outcomes (Thomas et al., 2023). Given the NICU's fast-paced environment, seamless teamwork is essential. Research shows that structured communication tools and standardized protocols improve collaboration, reduce errors, and enhance neonatal outcomes (Brewer et al., 2023).

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
Balancing professionalism with empathy involves acknowledging the family's emotions while refraining from offering false hope.	Communicate with Care
It is crucial to communicate medical information in simple, clear terms, avoiding jargon, while being truthful and refraining from providing false reassurance.	

Clear, timely communication improves parents' understanding and reduces anxiety in the NICU (Guttmann et al., 2024). Parents appreciate jargon-free dialogue that listens to their concerns and confirms understanding (Mardani-Hamooleh & Heidari, 2024). Nurses emphasized empathy, professionalism, and compassion despite challenges. Research shows empathy enhances communication, decision-making, and reduces family stress (Fenzia et al., 2019). Studies also highlight the importance of honest, clear communication to manage expectations and prevent misunderstandings (Shali et al., 2020; Sorin et al., 2021).

Advancing Excellence in the NICU Setting

Beneath every beeping monitor and delicate infant in the NICU, there is a nurse managing a realm of ongoing challenges and critical care. The high-pressure setting requires more than just clinical knowledge—it demands emotional resilience, quick thinking, and a consistent dedication to actions that save lives. Confronted with the unpredictability of neonatal health issues, nurses must utilize a set of strategies to not only tend to their patients but also to support themselves and their colleagues.

This section explores the various methods and coping strategies that NICU nurses utilize to navigate the challenges that come with their roles. Utilizing their experience and intuition in clinical decision-making, working collaboratively with interdisciplinary teams, and emphasizing emotional support and self-care practices are essential strategies to preserve not only the health of their patients but also the mental and emotional well-being of the caregivers. By looking into the techniques adopted by nurses, this discussion underscores their capacity to adapt, learn, and succeed in a high-stakes environment where the emotional impact can be profound. The resilience shown by nurses often stems from a blend of established protocols, personal strength, and a nurturing work environment, all of which aid in their ability to tackle the difficulties they encounter in neonatal care.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
In a fast-paced environment like the NICU, being systematic and organized is essential for managing numerous tasks efficiently and ensuring that nothing is overlooked.	Strategic & Prioritize Care Delivery
A systematic approach to task management involves prioritizing critical tasks first and completing them before moving on to less urgent responsibilities.	

Participants highlighted how triaging and assessing case severity help nurses efficiently allocate time and resources. Supporting this, Feldman and Rohan (2022) emphasized the need for data-driven staffing approaches in NICUs that consider infant acuity, nurse experience, and unit structure to improve workload management. This aligns with participants' practices of strategic nurse assignments based on patient needs and staff expertise.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
A neonate's gestational age plays a pivotal role in clinical decision-making, as it helps determine appropriate care protocols and interventions tailored to the infant's developmental stage and needs.	Informed Decision Making
Strong decision-making and critical thinking skills are essential for nurses to make informed, effective choices in patient care, especially in complex or high-pressure situations.	

Their responses highlight that prompt problem-solving and real-time assessment are essential for patient safety. This aligns with Kumar et al. (2020), who stress continuous monitoring of vital signs in NICUs to detect conditions needing immediate intervention. Additionally, effective NICU care relies on collaborative, multidisciplinary teamwork. Bell et al. (2023) emphasize involving families, managing team hierarchies, and ensuring smooth handoffs as key strategies to enhance teamwork and patient outcomes.

Formulated Meanings	Cluster of Themes
There is a need for specialized training in neonatal care to equip healthcare professionals with the skills necessary for effective newborn care.	Enhancing Capacity Building
Ongoing learning and embracing challenges foster both improved patient care and the professional growth of NICU nurses.	

NICU nurses should be well-equipped and well-trained. More education and seminars should be provided to support both the educational and skill growth of NICU nurses... When nurses have adequate training and resources, it not only improves patient outcomes but also boosts our confidence and overall well-being in providing care (NANN, 2023)

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study reveal that NICU nurses require not only advanced clinical skills but also emotional resilience, collaboration, and continuous professional development to manage the demands of caring for high-risk newborns. Their vital role in addressing critical care situations underscores the need for strategies that support both patient outcomes and nurse well-being. Four main themes emerged from their experiences. The first, Realities of NICU Nursing, highlights the intense workload, emotional toll, and the importance of teamwork. The second, Resilience and Growth, reflects how nurses cope through support systems, communication, self-care, and a commitment to lifelong learning. The third, Purpose and Integrity, emphasizes the compassion, accountability, and fulfillment nurses find in their work. The fourth, Advancing Excellence, illustrates how nurses strategically prioritize care, make informed decisions, and continually improve their practice.

These findings have significant implications for nursing practice, education, and research. In practice, there is a clear need for a structured approach to care prioritization, resource management, and specialized training in handling high-risk cases. Supportive work environments, including mentorship and teamwork, are essential to help nurses navigate the emotional and clinical challenges of NICU settings. In education, nursing programs must incorporate not only technical training but also resilience-building and coping

strategies to prepare students for high-stress environments like the NICU. Continued professional development through workshops and seminars is also critical for updating nurses on the latest protocols and best practices.

From a research perspective, further studies are needed to explore the emotional health and coping strategies of NICU nurses. Investigating long-term psychological effects, the role of peer support, and organizational influences on nurse well-being will help inform strategies to prevent burnout and enhance job satisfaction. Future research should also examine the impact of professional development on nurses' confidence and effectiveness, comparing performance before and after training interventions. Lastly, studying how institutional policies—such as staffing levels, mental health resources, and workplace culture—affect nurse well-being and patient care can help healthcare organizations develop evidence-based solutions to improve both staff satisfaction and neonatal outcomes.

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