The ALIGN Framework: A Parent-Informed Approach to Prognostic Communication in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

Simran Bansal1, Mary Carol Barks2, Debra Brandon, PhD, RN, CNS3, Kathryn Pollak, PhD3, Hannah Glass, MD, MAS4, Peter Ubel, MD4, Monica Lemmon, MD4

1Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University. 2Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy. 3Duke School of Medicine. 4UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital

BACKGROUND

In the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)....

Parents of critically ill infants must cope with grief, anxiety, and fear related to their child’s uncertain outcome.

Clinicians must deliver complex, uncertain, and distressing prognostic information to parents.

Good communication is key to helping (a) parents manage overwhelming emotions and (b) clinicians facilitate productive discussions about prognosis.

Yet, few tools exist to guide these conversations.

We aimed to address this gap by developing a parent-informed framework for communicating prognostic information in the NICU context.

METHODS

Conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 parents of 37 infants after meetings with the medical team, at hospital discharge, and 6 months post-discharge.

Used conventional content analysis to identify and refine codes, independently coded transcribed interviews in NVivo, and resolved discrepancies in consensus.

RESULTS

The ALIGN Framework

Approach

Learn

Inform

Give Support

Theme

Key Subthemes

APPROACH

• Provide consistency
• Allow time to process information

LEARN

• Facilitate & assess understanding
• Assess communication preferences

INFORM

• Admit to uncertainty
• Be thorough
• Be transparent, upfront, & honest
• Don’t name infant’s path
• Leave room for hope & provide balanced information
• Manage expectations

GIVE SUPPORT

• Show empathy
• Provide emotional support

NEXT STEPS

• Connect to resources

Select Quotes From Parent Interviews

On assessing communication preferences: “One of the most traumatizing parts of all of this is not having any control, so giving parents control over something as basic as how much information they want...even that is empowering.” (Mom of a premature infant with IVH)

On showing empathy: “I know you all get paid to have this whole character and stuff, but at the end of the day we still, we are both human. Talk to me on a personal level, not with all this medical stuff, but from deeply in your soul.” (Mom of an infant with a mitochondrial disorder)

On being transparent, upfront, and honest: “I'd rather you be transparent and straightforward because this has to do with her health and life. I don't want a doctor or a nurse on a team that's timid about what they have to say.” (Mom of an infant with congenital heart disease)

SUMMARY

Our results indicated five key themes, organized into phases of communication (Table 1). Parents valued consistent updates from trusted clinicians, discussions individualized to their preferences, honest, thorough, and balanced information, real-time support and connection to resources.

CONCLUSION: The ALIGN framework offers a novel, parent-informed strategy to guide prognostic discussions, while allowing for flexibility and acknowledging that steps are iterative. Future studies should examine how using this framework in practice impacts parent-provider communication.