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Special Care Nursery at St. Luke's

For many months there has been concern and speculation about the future of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at St. Luke's. That speculation is now over thanks to a partnership involving physicians and CPMC leaders that have come up with a program to deliver the highest level of care possible for mothers and their newborn babies at St. Luke's.

Background

- The St. Luke's NICU has had only one or two babies on any given day.
- Studies show high-volume NICUs, such as the one at our California campus, are better than low-volume NICUs at being able to keep up the skill level and expertise needed to treat very sick infants.
- Since mid-2007, CPMC has been transferring the most fragile infants – those with the most serious health issues – from St. Luke's to the California Campus on a regular basis, where they can receive the most expert and specialized care.
- Given these quality parameters, we proposed transferring all the St. Luke's NICU patients to the California Campus.

Change of mind

Our proposal drew an immediate, and strong, response from the St. Luke's community and our own physicians and nurses. The physicians in particular felt this move could impact their ability to offer quality obstetric care to our patients at St. Luke's.

After listening to them we created a partnership involving physicians, nurses and hospital leadership to find another solution. This team quickly came to several conclusions:

- Most of the babies treated in St. Luke's NICU were not experiencing life-threatening conditions. They needed more care than they could get in a well-baby nursery but were not in need of long-term ventilation, incubators, etc.
- We had an excellent, well-trained staff already in place at St. Luke's
- If possible, it made more sense to keep babies as close to their mothers and family as possible.

The solution we came up with was a Special Care Nursery. This kind of nursery means we can take care of babies who are not doing well – they may be experiencing feeding problems or have an infection and need blood-work and medication – but who are not in need of being sent to a much higher Level NICU.

This new Special Care Nursery will have the same excellent pediatric hospitalist (a physician who specializes in taking care of children in the hospital) as well as nurses experienced in working in a NICU, who have been providing care at St. Luke's. They will be on staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We are also training other maternity nurses so they are able to support the physicians and NICU nurses in meeting the immediate, critical care needs of newborns experiencing problems.

As part of this process, our leadership team agreed to meet with the physicians on a weekly basis to monitor progress. We had hoped to be able to open the Special Care Nursery in mid-February, but when it became clear

that all the nurses would not be fully trained in time, we postponed that date until March. Even after the new Special Care Nursery is open we will continue to meet with physicians and nurses to make sure that the unit is working well and offering mothers and newborns the highest quality, family-centered care.

In some cases, where the newborn is experiencing life-threatening problems, it will still be necessary to transfer them to our California campus, which has more resources and advanced facilities. In these cases (probably only between 10 and 30 a year) the parents will be able to accompany the child and stay with them 24-hours a day if they wish to. Social workers will also help the family with any transportation issues they may have, and even arrange for them to stay in our Family House, right next to the hospital, for as long as is necessary.

Our goal in all of this has been to listen to our physicians, our nurses and the community and to work with them in offering our patients the highest level of care. Our patients have placed their lives in our hands. We owe them nothing less than the best.

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