

Grace Gane Memorial Award Lecture 2012

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Grace Gane Memorial Lecture – Baby Bites: Why a speech-language therapist in a neonatal unit

There have been significant medical advances in the management of neonates in the last twenty years.

Since the 1990s there has been rapid expansion of the role of the speech-language therapist within this population which has created a number of challenges for speech-language therapists working in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). We have learned to deal with children who have survived against incredible odds; being born very tiny and very early, often on prolonged respiratory support, who may have had a tracheostomy or a nasopharyngeal airway, who may have had a cerebral bleed, issues with drug withdrawal, and/or metabolic, muscular-skeletal, or cardiac anomalies. The list of what NICU 'graduates' cope with goes on.

As the survival rate of premature and very sick neonates has improved, the role of the speech-language therapist has become an integral part of their care. Continually evolving understanding of the importance of developmentally supportive care for these infants impacts on intervention styles and methods. Given the complexities involved in this emerging field, defining the role of the speech-language therapist has been a rollercoaster ride of discovery.

This lecture will explore the process of service development in an area new to speech-language therapy in New Zealand. This will include discussion of:

- The interface between the roles of a lactation consultant and a speech-language therapist.
- Non-nutritive sucking in an environment of developmentally supportive care
- Adaptation of the "Hands off Technique" (Fletcher & Harris in Breastfeeding Review, 2000 8(1) 19-23.
- The intertwining of communication and feeding in the NICU.