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COLLABORATION/ PARENTING: TRANSITION TO HOME

Finding a Pediatrician

One of your main tasks in preparing for your baby's discharge is to decide who will follow your baby's medical care beyond the NICU. Selecting a medical caregiver can be comforting because it ensures that you won't be adrift and isolated from medical support after discharge. Some families already have a pediatrician or a general practitioner or chose one before the delivery. In many NICUs, these practitioners have minimal contact with the baby during the hospital stay, becoming involved only upon discharge.

If you had a chance to interview some pediatricians before you knew that you would have a baby in the NICU, the questions you asked then may only partially cover your concerns now. Now your ideas about medical care are bound to have changed. Your requirements have risen because of your baby's special beginning and ongoing needs. You may have a clear sense of what you need in a relationship with a pediatrician. You certainly want to find someone who is knowledgeable, thorough, responsive, available, and reassuring without being dismissive. Part of your role as parent involves clarifying both your baby's needs and your own needs—and seeking a physician who will respect and honor them. Especially if you considered yourself a member of the NICU health care team, you will want a pediatrician who considers you to be a teammate as well.

If you are choosing a new pediatrician or want to discuss your baby's unique needs with one who you had tentatively chosen, here are some issues to consider:

- Is this doctor in independent practice or part of a group? How is on-call and vacation coverage arranged? How do you reach the doctor in an emergency?

- Does this doctor see your vigilance as a healthy adaptation to having a fragile newborn or a sign of pathological anxiety? Will this physician honor your job as parent and partner in your baby's care?
- What is this doctor's approach to collaborating with other physicians and specialists? Does this fit with your ideas and your baby's needs?
- Who will coordinate your baby's medical care if she or he must see multiple specialists?
- What is the doctor's stance on breast-feeding? How much support and encouragement can you expect if you are committed to breast-feeding but are struggling?
- Is this doctor specifically experienced with premature or special needs infants?
- What is this physician's attitude toward developmental follow-up?
- Do you get the impression that your questions or concerns will be taken seriously and not brushed off?
- What sort of support do you feel you need as the parent of your baby? Does this doctor appear to be interested and able to provide this type of support?
- What does your intuition tell you about how well you and this doctor can work together? Do your styles of relating mesh well? Does this physician seem warm and open to you?

Deciding on a pediatrician can be challenging for any new parent. It's okay to make a choice and then switch after a few months if the fit is not good. Trial runs are part of finding a caregiver who will collaborate with you as your child grows. When you have additional concerns, whether they are medical, developmental, or emotional, honor those needs. Look for a pediatrician who values your input and boosts your confidence in yourself as a parent. There are many pediatricians who work very well with former NICU babies and families, and you shouldn't have to settle for less. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want and continue looking if you have not yet found it. You and your baby deserve to get the extra care, reassurance, and support you need.

