
Skin-to-skin contact as the place for care: Protocol for an observational study with preterm infants in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

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Abstract

Despite significant improvements in perinatal healthcare, primarily due to technological advancements, there is a growing movement for humanizing care, addressing issues such as mother-newborn separation, which is frequently observed in preterm births. The need to address the detrimental impact of such procedures led to an increased awareness for practices that maintain the dyad together, such as the integration of Kangaroo Mother Care in the healthcare practices for preterm infants hospitalized in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, which includes the component of skin-to-skin contact. The conceptualization of nurturescience (Bergman et al., 2019) also supports this paradigm shift, proposing skin-to-skin contact as the biologically expected place for care. Nonetheless, there is insufficient monitoring of skin-to-skin contact to inform how this practice is being implemented. Moreover, the mechanisms underlying reported beneficial outcomes remain to be better elucidated, particularly after hospital discharge. To address these concerns, a protocol for an observational study has been developed to monitor the implementation of skin-to-skin contact when born preterm, as well as to explore its effects on physiological stability during hospitalization and on developmental outcomes after hospital discharge. Additionally, the mediating role of epigenetic mechanisms involving affiliative neurophysiological systems will be examined. The study will be carried out in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in Portugal and preterm newborns with a gestational age between 28 and 36 weeks and 6 days will be eligible for inclusion. Findings will contribute to promote evidence-based practices, enhancing the quality of healthcare.

Keywords: skin-to-skin contact, Kangaroo Mother Care, preterm, NICU, infancy

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