

When a NICU doctor became a NICU parent

As a neonatologist, Jawad Javed, MD, has spent his career caring for some of the smallest and most medically fragile babies. But nothing could prepare him for the day he became a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) parent himself.

"I was a new neonatologist at that time and had only been in practice for a couple of years," says Dr. Javed, who now is the division head and medical director of Neonatology with OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois in Peoria, Illinois.

"Nothing can quite prepare you for having a premature baby. It didn't matter how much I knew. My wife's a pediatrician; it didn't matter how much she knew. It's terrifying, and those first moments when the baby is born and they're rushing you off to the NICU; it is a blur."

Despite his medical training, Dr. Javed says he struggled to process information during those early days in the NICU, when his now 13-year-old son was born at 32 weeks.

He estimates he truly absorbed only about 10-15% of what was being communicated to him and his wife. The experience gave him a new perspective on what families are experiencing during some of the most emotional moments of their lives.

"Sometimes as a provider, you feel like you want to give everything. But sometimes families just need time to digest what just happened," Dr. Javed points out, saying his experience has changed his entire care model.

Now his son is an energetic, on-the-go teenager that Dr. Javed jokes is the "life of the party." He credits the NICU team that cared for him as a big part of that.

"It was a blessing in disguise early in my career. It changed how I communicate with families," Dr. Javed adds. "Those conversations that we have with families might be some of the most important moments each day for them. For the provider, you might be seeing 20 patients, but that family is waiting to hear about the next plan and the next decision."

Today, Dr. Javed leads a team at OSF Children's Hospital that provides the highest level of neonatal care available. 140 pediatric physicians are involved in caring for NICU patients, Dr. Javed says, providing expertise across a wide range of specialties.

The hospital has been designated a Level IV NICU by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the highest designation for neonatal intensive care.

Level IV NICUs provide the most comprehensive care for premature and critically ill newborns. At OSF Children's Hospital, specialists routinely care for babies born as early as 22 weeks' gestation.

What elevates a Level 4 NICU above other facilities is the breadth of specialized services available around the clock. OSF Children's Hospital offers comprehensive surgical support, including emergency and trauma, neurosurgery, orthopedics, ophthalmology and pediatric cardiac surgery, which includes congenital heart conditions.

Unlike facilities that may rely on visiting specialists, these experts are available as part of the hospital's care team every day.

While several hospitals in Central Illinois provide Level III neonatal care, OSF Children's Hospital is the only Level IV NICU between Chicago and St. Louis.

For babies born at 22 weeks, every organ system is still developing, creating significant medical challenges.

Their skin has not fully developed its protective outer layer, increasing the risk of infection. Their blood vessels are extremely small, requiring highly specialized intravenous (IV) access and monitoring.

Their lungs are also underdeveloped. At 22 weeks' gestation, the lungs are in a very early stage of development, making respiratory support essential.

The blood vessels in the brain remain fragile and can be prone to bleeding. The digestive system is also immature, making nutrition a major focus of care.

To support growth and development, many infants receive specialized IV nutrition and donor breast milk. Speech therapists also play an important role by helping babies develop oral motor skills needed for feeding.

Even the NICU environment is carefully designed to support development. Lights are often dimmed to create a neurologically appropriate setting that more closely resembles conditions in the womb.

While many NICU patients need only short-term support after birth, others require months of intensive care.

The average NICU stay for most infants is about two to two-and-a-half weeks. Most are considered transitional infants requiring short-term care who need additional monitoring or treatment after birth before going home.

The hospital also cares for approximately 60 to 70 of its smallest and most premature patients at any given time. Babies born before 30 weeks' gestation often remain hospitalized for four-and-a-half to five months, depending on the complexity of their medical needs. Advances in neonatal care now allow many of these infants born so early to both survive and thrive.

Supporting families is another critical part of NICU care.

Many families travel one to two hours for treatment and must balance hospital visits with work and other responsibilities. Care teams use tools such as telemedicine to help keep families connected and informed.

Dr. Javed says that OSF HealthCare partners with the Family Home and Ronald McDonald House in Peoria to provide low-cost or no-cost lodging options for families while their children are receiving care.

To learn more about NICU services at OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois, [visit here](#).