

Don't forget the pediatric intensive care units: the nurses' point of view

Emanuele Buccione¹, Michele Stellabotte²

¹ RN, MScN, Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, Health Local Authority 3, Pescara, Italy

² RN, MScN, Pediatric Operating Room, ASST Grande Ospedale Metropolitano Niguarda, Milano, Italy

“Intensive care is not provided with a bed and a ventilator. Also, we need someone who can dedicate the right amount of time to patients, someone who knows how to do it”. About three years ago, in an interview, Prof. Gattinoni spoke about the difficulties intensive care units faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, Minardi and colleagues described the shortage of paediatric intensive care unit (PICU) beds in Italy. Indeed, in Italy, the number of beds in the PICU is only 273, with a ratio of 1 bed per 35 856 paediatric patients, which is far from the standard¹. Unfortunately, this is not just the case for PICU beds that are missing. In 2019, in an observational study focused on 169 paediatric units and 2769 nurses, Sasso et al. described a national average nursing staffing of 3.55 patients per nurse in critical care units² which is significantly higher than the one patient per nurse recommended by the Royal College of Nursing in 2013. The same study highlights “non-excellent” levels of quality of care reported by 80% of the nurses interviewed. Furthermore, the safety of the patients was described as “not good” by 49% of sample². Lastly, a previous literature review underlined the evidence of the association between nursing experience, certification, high-level degree, and in-hospital survival in the PICU³.

With Ministerial Decree 739/94 and the professional profile of the paediatric nurse published in 1997, paediatrics was identified as a specialty area, which requires an ad hoc professional. Consequently, since 1994, there have been specific paths to train an adequate number of nurses. Instead, we face a shortage of professionals working in the paediatric field, many of whom do not have specific certifications. Only a few Italian universities have postgraduate courses for paediatric and neonatal nurses, and only a few

have training courses in paediatric and neonatal intensive care and emergency care. Indeed, in the sample described in the Sasso et al. study, only 29% had undergraduate training in paediatric nursing and only 18% had completed a postgraduate course (not limited to paediatric courses only)².

Currently, in Italy, there are not enough paediatric intensive care beds, and an adequate number of trained nurses is lacking, particularly in paediatric settings. This could result in decreased quality of care and safety levels for patients and their families.

All the institutions should work synergistically. We urgently need to rethink the structure of training courses, giving all nurses the opportunity to have the same knowledge and certification throughout the national territory, with the cooperation of universities, professional orders, and relevant scientific societies. Subsequently, it is necessary to raise awareness among the population regarding the importance of nurses' roles. Finally, adequate economic and professional recognition, especially regarding specialisations, could make this profession attractive and popular.

The shortage of nurses is now significant; an increasing number of colleagues are deciding to move to other countries to find better working conditions, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. The actions described above are just some of the strictly necessary steps to avoid the collapse of the national health system.

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to infermieristica Editore Limited 2024.

References

1. Minardi C, Conti G, Moscatelli A, Tesoro S, Bussolin L. Shortage of paediatric intensive care unit beds in Italy. *The Lancet*. 2023;402(10412):1525. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(23)01791-9
2. Sasso L, Bagnasco A, Scelsi S, et al. Impatto dell'assistenza infermieristica pediatrica sulla qualità delle cure: RN4CAST@IT-PED, un'analisi descrittiva. *L'Infermiere*. 2019;4.
3. Genna C, Thekkan KR, Raymakers-Janssen PAMA, Gawronski O. Is nurse staffing associated with critical deterioration events on acute and critical care pediatric wards? A literature review. *Eur J Pediatr*. Published online February 10, 2023. doi:10.1007/s00431-022-04803-2