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Where medicine meets melody—Lullaby Hour brings harmony to the neonatal ICU

A musical charity provides moments of calm for babies and parents amid the intensity of neonatal wards. **Anna Caldwell** talks to the doctors and musicians involved

Anna Caldwell *freelance journalist*

In 2025, Music in Hospitals & Care has delivered more than 90 hours of live music to neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) in the UK, reaching more than 1000 seriously ill babies.¹

The charity has been providing soothing tunes for babies and parents through its Lullaby Hour sessions since 2017, bringing a sense of calm to intensive medical settings, including adult intensive care units. Vicky Daborn Tedder, impact and insights manager at Music in Hospitals & Care, tells *The BMJ*, “We really see that the music makes such a difference, and it becomes a necessity, not just a nicety.”

The charity’s musicians have songbooks from which parents can choose something to be played to their baby—but they also take requests, creating tender moments amid the daily challenges of life in the NICU.

Mica Bernard, singer and guitarist, tells *The BMJ*, “One couple, who were pregnant on their wedding day, said that their first dance song was *The Book of Love*. So, they asked me to learn it because they were kind of dancing as a three on that day, and they wanted it as their special song as a three now.”

Healing harmonies

Several studies have found a positive effect of music therapy on preterm babies in the NICU—including lowering heart rate and respiratory rate, as well as increasing feeding volume—although a 2021 meta-analysis highlighted the low certainty of the evidence.²

Bernard says, “When I’m singing to the baby, I can literally see their heart rate calming down or their oxygen increasing. I think it goes to show just how built in music is for human beings.”

Contrary to some parents’ concerns, research by Music in Hospitals & Care shows that babies are frequently observed falling asleep or staying asleep during the live music. Sometimes it’s played during distressing times such as clinical procedures and nappy changes.

Jay Banerjee, neonatal consultant at the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, tells *The BMJ*, “Having a baby in a neonatal intensive care unit is a difficult and traumatic time for babies and their families, so to be able to provide moments of calm through Lullaby Hour is something we’re incredibly proud of.

“These music sessions not only help parents bond with their baby but also provide a moment’s respite from an uncertain and stressful situation. The feedback from families and the clinical team here has been universally positive.”

Finding normality in the NICU

The bonding element of Lullaby Hour is particularly important for parents who can’t hold their baby who is in an incubator.

Bernard explains, “Often, if it’s the first time I’ve sung to a parent, it’s the perfect outlet for them to be able to cry. Sometimes when a traumatising situation happens, it can be really hard to let go of those emotions, so it often feels like I walk into a room and there’s so much tension, with parents trying to be strong for their baby. The music helps them get in touch with what they’re feeling.”

The music also provides some sense of normality in intensive care wards. Gail Scott-Spicer, chief executive of Imperial Health Charity, which delivers arts programmes to hospitals, tells *The BMJ*, “The environment of a neonatal intensive care unit is, of course, quite overwhelming. It’s intense—not just the situation that the parents and babies are in but also the environment. There’s a lot of machinery, it can be quite noisy, and I know that the wards work really hard to reduce the noise levels, but at the end of the day it’s a very clinical environment.

“To be able to bring a bit of ‘normal’ into that situation starts to explain the really positive health outcomes for the babies, and it reduces stress and anxiety for the families.”

You can donate to Music in Hospitals & Care at <https://mihc.org.uk/donate/big-give/>

Competing interests: I have read and understood the BMJ Group policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Otter.ai was used to transcribe the audio of interviews.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

1 Music in Hospitals & Care. Sharing the healing power of live music in hospitals. YouTube 22 May 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHHYricz_zs&t=71s

2 Mohan A, Gokulakrishnan G, El-Saie A, Brickley A, Hagan J, Pammi M. Music therapy for preterm neonates in the neonatal intensive care unit: An overview of systematic reviews. *Acta Paediatr* 2021;110:-200. doi: 10.1111/apa.16055. pmid: 34346112