Reviewer’s report

Title: Perceptions and actions of healthcare professionals regarding mother-child relationship in an intermediate neonatal intensive care unit: a qualitative study

Version: 2
Date: 2 April 2014

Reviewer: Tania McIntosh

Reviewer’s report:

This is a very interesting and well put together paper on a topic of importance to health professionals. The paper uses a qualitative methodology to explore the attitudes and experiences of health care professionals working with babies and families in the neonatal care environment. The paper draws on the theoretical concept of 'holding' to explore the physical and emotional care given by professionals, and the discourses around this. The researchers develop a nuanced appreciate of the drivers in care provision, and the contradictions and tensions in caring for the baby (their principal responsibility) whilst also supporting and encouraging the mother to develop a necessary bond with the baby. There is clearly a fine line that health professionals tread between expecting more from mothers than they are able to give, and being critical or anxious for the baby if they give too much. Overall a thought-provoking paper which has applicability internationally and across care settings.

Major compulsory revisions:

None

1) Be clear in your title and abstract that you are focusing on premature babies, rather than the range of cases which may be seen in an NICU. It is not clear from interview guide that premature babies are your focus; please make clear types of cases cared for in NICU (ie are there term babies with congenital conditions etc, and was care of these not part of your study?)

2) In 'results' section of abstract and in 'conclusion' a more nuanced approach would be beneficial. You have glossed over the complexities of your findings at both these points, and including a recognition of these strengthens the paper.

Minor essential revisions:

1) 2nd sentence of abstract hard to follow; suggest tightening it or splitting into two sentences.

2) A very brief definition of 'holding' would be useful in abstract.

3) 'Parents' and 'mothers' used somewhat interchangably in first three paragraphs of Background. Be clear about your focus.

4) define 'intermediate' in context of NICU; readers from other countries may not use same terminology.

5) 'Type of study'. Paragraph 1, include reference for theoretical basis.
6) 'methods' 3rd paragraph, second sentence. Quite value laden; do you mean when baby in NICU or generally? Include reference

7) last sentence 'results' 'where' not 'were'

8) Be clear in your title and abstract that you are focusing on premature babies, rather than the range of cases which may be seen in an NICU. It is not clear from interview guide that premature babies are your focus; please make clear types of cases cared for in NICU (ie are there term babies with congential conditions etc, and was care of these not part of your study?)

9) In 'results' section of abstract and in 'conclusion' a more nuanced approach would be benefical. You have glossed over the complexities of your findings at both these points, and including a recognition of these strenghtens the paper.

Discretionary revisions;
Would be useful for readers not familiar with service in this area to give brief detail about what proportion of total staff included in study and about what kinds of acre are given. How far to mums and babies travel? Do they tend to be admitted after delivering elsewhere?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests