

Shortage of nurses puts babies at risk

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Thousands of the sickest newborns are at risk because of severe shortages of neonatal nurses and doctors, a charity has warned.

Nurses "are being stretched to breaking point", with another 2,140 needed across England to meet minimum standards, according to Bliss, the sick baby charity. Some 70 per cent of intensive care units for sick and premature infants are caring for more children than is safe, a report found.

Six years ago the Department of Health published the *Toolkit for High-Quality Neonatal Services*, which said intensive care units should have a ratio of one nurse to one baby. In special care, the ratio is one member of staff to four babies and the figure is one nurse to two babies in high-dependency units.

However, 64 per cent of units do not have enough nurses, and two thirds do not have enough doctors to meet the recommendations. The poorest performing unit was 172 full-time nurses short of meeting the national standards.

The charity said that the shortage was largely due to "a severe lack of funding". Caroline Davey, chief executive of Bliss, said: "This must be a wake-up call for policy makers and health-care commissioners to take action. This unprecedented shortage is putting babies' safety, survival and long-term development at risk."

An NHS spokeswoman said: "Despite increasing demand, studies consistently show standards of NHS neonatal care are on a par with other European countries. We will consider the recommendations of the report and continue to work closely with Bliss and others to improve neonatal services."

Times
October 19th 2015