

1 **TITLE PAGE**

2 **TITLE: Barriers to delivery of enteral nutrition in pediatric intensive care: a world survey**

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4 ***the ESPNIC Metabolism, Endocrine and Nutrition section***

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67 **Abstract**

68 **Objective**

69 To explore the perceived barriers by pediatric intensive care healthcare professionals (nurses,
70 dieticians and physicians) in delivering enteral nutrition (EN) to critically ill children across the world.

71 **Design**

72 Cross-sectional international online survey adapted for use in pediatric settings.

73 **Setting and subjects**

74 Pediatric Intensive Care physicians, nurses and dietitians across the world

75 **Interventions**

76 The 20-item adult intensive care 'Barriers to delivery of enteral nutrition' survey was modified for
77 pediatric settings, tested and translated into ten languages. The survey was distributed online to
78 pediatric intensive care nurses, physicians and dieticians via professional networks in March – June
79 2019. Professionals were asked to rate each item indicating the degree to which they perceived it
80 hinders the provision of EN in their pediatric intensive care unit (PICUs) with a 7-point Likert scale from
81 0 "not at all a barrier" to 6 "an extreme amount".

82 **Measurement and Main Results**

83 920 pediatric intensive care professionals responded from 57 countries; 477/920 (52%) nurses,
84 407/920 (44%) physicians and 36/920 (4%) dieticians. Sixty-two percent had more than five years PICU
85 experience and 49% worked in general PICUs, with 35% working in combined cardiac and general
86 PICUs. The top three perceived barriers across all professional groups were: (1) enteral feeds being
87 withheld in advance of procedures or operating department visits, (2) none or not enough dietitian
88 coverage on weekends or evenings, (3) not enough time dedicated to education and training on how
89 to optimally feed patients.

90 **Conclusions**

91 This is the largest survey that has explored perceived barriers to the delivery of enteral nutrition across
92 the world by physicians, nurses and dietitians. There were some similarities with adult intensive care
93 barriers. In all professional groups, the perception of barriers reduced with years PICU experience.
94 This survey highlights implications for PICU practice around more focussed nutrition education for all
95 PICU professional groups.

96

97 **Keywords:** child; infant; critical care; enteral nutrition; feeding; practices

98

99 **Article tweet:**

100 PICUs should identify barriers to delivering enteral nutrition in their PICU using a newly adapted
101 quality improvement tool for pediatrics

102 <https://espn-online.org/Education/Professional-Resources>

103 **Introduction**

104 Successfully achieving delivery of enteral nutrition (EN) to critically ill children is associated with
105 improved clinical outcomes (1,2). Yet, multiple barriers remain to achieving adequate nutrition
106 enterally in the critically ill child. Some of these are common to all pediatric intensive care units
107 (PICUs), but for some, the barrier is organisation and unit specific (3,4). Recently, a survey instrument
108 was developed and validated for adult intensive care units (AICUs) (5-7) to assess EN barriers in an
109 ICU. This tool allowed clinicians to directly assess and address the perceived barriers in their ICU, with
110 an aim to optimise enteral nutrition delivery. In the adult survey, 20 known barriers to delivering EN
111 identified in the literature are rated on a Likert scale relating to the perception of the item being a
112 barrier. The aim of our study was to explore the barriers in providing optimal nutrition to children in
113 PICU settings worldwide as viewed by nurses, doctors and dieticians using this survey tool, modified
114 for the pediatric setting.

115

116 **Materials and methods**

117 A cross-sectional electronic survey design was used. The 20-item adult survey instrument (5-7) was
118 examined and modifications were made based on previously identified pediatric barriers from the
119 literature. The modified survey was then pilot tested in a single UK PICU with 62 PICU staff (physicians,
120 nurses and dieticians). All items from the adult survey were considered relevant and therefore no
121 items were deleted; however, the wording of some items was revised for clarification. Four additional
122 barrier items specific for PICU population were identified and added to the survey. Afterwards, pilot
123 testing with nine professionals in a second PICU (in France) using the same method yielded one
124 additional barrier item, resulting in a new 25-item barrier of enteral nutrition in PICU survey
125 (Supplemental Figure 1). Added items were: 1) Severe fluid restriction; 2) conservative PICU feeding
126 protocol; 3) Feeding tube or pump delivery problems; 4) Enteral feeds withheld for bedside
127 procedures; and 5) Lack of staff knowledge and support around breastfeeding mothers.

128 In addition to the 25 barriers, basic demographic data was collected; PICU experience, PICU type and
129 country, with one open ended question asking if there were any other barriers not listed. The survey
130 was translated from English by bi-lingual clinicians into ten languages (French, Italian, Dutch, German,
131 Latvian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Polish and Portuguese) using a recognised cultural adaptation
132 process (8) and tested by local clinicians for face validity. SurveyMonkey™ was used for distribution.
133 Given the nature of distribution of this survey, there was no anticipated survey response. However,
134 we aimed for an equal spread across continents and near equal amongst professional groups
135 (acknowledging that the dietician numbers would be lower based on the number of dietitians
136 compared to physicians and nurses). The inclusion criteria were: nurses, assistant nurses, dietitians
137 and doctors who are working in a PICU and make decisions around feeding in critically ill children. The
138 exclusion criteria were: non-clinical nurses or staff who worked permanently outside clinical PICU
139 setting. Neonatal and adult intensive care staff were excluded. If PICUs were mixed (neonates or
140 adults), the introduction letter made it clear that the questions were to be answered regarding feeding
141 in children aged 0 (term infants) to 17 years.

142 *Data collection*

143 The e-survey was sent out via established professional networks to PICU nurses, doctors and dietitians
144 via country leads and via organisational newsletters (The European Society of Pediatric and Neonatal
145 Intensive Care (ESPNIC), the UK Pediatric Intensive Care Society (PICS) and the World Federation of
146 Pediatric Intensive Care Societies (WFPICS) in March -June 2019. Reminders were sent to country leads
147 with low responses to improve response rates. No identifiable staff, patient or PICU data was
148 collected, and consent was implied by completing the survey. Country leads were responsible for
149 ensuring ethical requirements were obtained according to their country regulation. In the UK, (where
150 data were gathered and analysed) this study was approved by the Pediatric Intensive Care Society
151 (PICS) Study group and was approved as an audit by University Hospitals Bristol. Ethical approval was

152 provided in the Netherlands by the Institutional Review Board of the Erasmus Medical Centre [MEC-
153 2019-0065].

154 *Data analysis*

155 The datasets (one for each language version) from SurveyMonkey were downloaded, checked and
156 combined into one dataset and imported into IBM SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) for
157 analysis. All data were categorical data or ordinal data (Likert scale) and were first analysed
158 descriptively and then inferential analysis undertaken to test relationships between categorical
159 variables including continents/geographical regions, professional groups, PICU type regarding
160 perceived barriers using chi square tests. The Likert scale ranged from 0 (not at all) to 6 (an extreme
161 amount). Median [IQR] refers to the full Likers scale. However, barriers were further categorised as
162 not a barrier (respondents who scored 0), moderate barrier (respondents who scored 1-3) and
163 important barrier (respondents who scored score 4-6) consistent with the adult survey analysis (5,6).
164 For subgroup analysis, the Europe countries were classified into three European regions as in the
165 ETHICUS study (9); northern (Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden, and United
166 Kingdom), central (Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Poland, and Switzerland), and
167 southern (Bulgaria, Italy, Portugal, Spain). When a statically significant level was obtained using Chi
168 square, differences between the variable were further compared using a z-test with Bonferroni
169 correction. A p-value of <0.05 was considered significant and two tailed tests were used.

170 **Results**

171 There were 920 survey responses from 57 countries (Figure 1). Most respondents were nurses (52%),
172 and physicians (44%) followed by dieticians (4%). Sixty-two percent of respondents had more than five
173 years PICU experience, and half (49%) worked in a general PICU with 32% in a mixed cardiac and
174 general PICU (Table 1).

175 *Top Barriers*

176 The top five perceived barriers were: 1. Enteral feeds being withheld in advance of procedures or
177 operating department visits (43%), 2. No dietician coverage on weekends, evenings or holidays (38%),
178 3. Not enough time dedicated to education and training on optimal feeding of patients (34%), 4. In
179 stable resuscitated patients, other aspects of care taking priority over nutrition (33%) and 5. Delays in
180 obtaining small bowel access in patients intolerant of nutrition (31%). Table 2 presents the perceived
181 importance of all barriers. However, these perceived barriers differed by professional group (Table 3
182 and Table 4). Importantly, dietitians perceived severe fluid restriction as the most significant barrier
183 (69%), whereas for physicians it was withholding feeds before procedures (46%) and for nurses it was
184 insufficient dietician coverage on weekends, evenings and holidays (44%).

185 Comparing different PICU types: general PICUs compared to units which admitted cardiac surgical
186 children and combined PICU-NICUs showed little differences in perceived barriers (Table 5) with
187 severe fluid restriction being rated highly as a barrier across all PICU types (General 27% vs General &
188 Cardiac 31% vs PICU and NICU 26% $p=0.354$). The two highest perceived barriers were consistent
189 among the PICU types: Not enough (or no) dietician coverage during weekends, evenings and holidays
190 ($p=0.664$) and not enough time dedicated to education and training on how to optimally feed patients
191 ($p=0.701$). When we examined perceived barriers by years of PICU experience, in all groups we found
192 a reduction in perceived barriers as PICU experience increased (Supplementary file 2). This was
193 statistically significant for seven barriers.

194 Within Europe (with the largest number of respondents; $n=517$), there were several significant
195 differences in perceived barriers between northern, central and southern Europe (Table 6). Four
196 barriers were perceived as a significantly greater barrier in northern Europe compared to southern or
197 central Europe, these were: nutrition therapy not discussed on ward rounds ($p<0.001$), waiting for
198 the dietitian to assess the patient ($p=0.004$), not enough dedicated time for training and education on
199 how to optimally feed patients ($p<0.001$), and lack of familiarity with current guidelines for nutrition
200 in the PICU ($p=0.001$).

201 There were also significant differences in 14 perceived barriers when comparing continents
202 (Supplement file 3). Across all continents the biggest perceived barrier was enteral feeds being
203 withheld for procedures and operating department visits, and this was the highest perceived barrier
204 in Southern America. A lack of knowledge around breastfeeding mothers was also significantly
205 different between continents with the barrier perceived almost three times more in Northern America
206 (48%) compared to Australasia (17%) ($p=0.001$). Most strikingly, was the perceived lack of dietician
207 support and coverage in PICUs, which varied across countries, but even in units with a dietician (many
208 had no dietitian input at all).

209 **Discussion**

210 This is the largest survey undertaken to identify perceived barriers to the delivery of enteral nutrition
211 in PICU settings across the world. It is also only the second survey to include all three professional
212 groups responsible for the delivery of EN in the ICU (nurses, physicians and dieticians). With
213 permission, we adapted and tested a new pediatric version of the survey tool validated for adult
214 intensive care (5-7), providing a new pediatric version of this quality improvement tool.

215 We identified the main perceived barriers of enteral nutrition in PICU that were related to fasting for
216 procedures, dietician coverage, inadequate education, care priorities and delays in gained small bowel
217 access. However, there was variability in perceived barriers between the professional groups. In PICU,
218 the first observational study to describe barriers to EN (10) found severe fluid restriction in children
219 with congenital heart disease (CHD) the main barrier, followed by the interruption of feeds for
220 procedures. In our study, only the dieticians perceived this as the most important barrier, and overall
221 it ranked sixth. Interestingly, we did not find any significant difference between PICUs that admitted
222 cardiac surgical children and those that did not, even though the fluid restriction for post-operative
223 cardiac children is greater.

224 Cahill et al., (5) used the adult barriers survey to explore the views of 138 critical care nurses across
225 five adult intensive care units in the USA and Canada. Three of these are consistent with our top five

226 PICU perceived barriers but ranked differently. However, another adult ICU survey (11), found
227 different barriers: with the main barrier being insufficient nursing staff to deliver EN (60%) followed
228 by a fear of adverse events by feeding aggressively (56%).

229 The problem of feed interruption is well recognised (3,4,12). Mehta et al., (12) in a prospective
230 observational study of 117 children, found interruptions occurred in 30% of PICU patients, and 58% of
231 these interruptions were classed as avoidable. A Canadian survey of physicians and dieticians (3) also
232 found fasting for procedures a major barrier. Fasting for procedures, both in the PICU (such as for
233 extubation) or outside the PICU (for radiological procedures) and to the operating department, are
234 considerable problems for most intensive care patients. No evidence exists regarding 'safe' fasting
235 times for critically ill children and specifically which procedures require fasting for. The fear driving
236 the fasting, is potentially having a 'full stomach' and the risk of pulmonary aspiration associated with
237 emergency reintubation (if the endotracheal tube became dislodged). Despite recent ERAS
238 recommendations for 'well' children being fasted preoperatively, which have considerably reduced
239 fasting times (13), there is no evidence for fasting times in critically ill children, being fed, often
240 minimally and already intubated. New techniques, such as gastric antral ultrasound (14,15), need to
241 be examined in the PICU population, to determine a more accurate way to individualise fasting times
242 to critically ill children, with a view to avoiding the blanket 6 hour fasting rule.

243 In a UK-wide survey of PICU physicians, nurses and dieticians (4), the top five barriers were: severe
244 fluid restriction (60%), the child being 'too ill' to feed (17%), surgical post-operative orders (17%),
245 nursing staff being slow in starting feeds (7%) and hemodynamic instability (7%). **However, despite**
246 **the paucity of randomized trial evidence to support enteral feeding during critical illness states, a**
247 **substantial body of observational study evidence exists (16,17,18,19,20) indicating early EN is both**
248 **feasible and improves clinical outcomes.**

249 More recently, a retrospective study of 444 children in 6 PICUs in the USA (21), identified the biggest
250 risk factors for delayed EN were non-invasive ventilation (NIV), followed by invasive ventilation,

251 increasing severity of illness, impending procedures and gastrointestinal disturbances within the first
252 48 hours. Interestingly, non-invasive ventilation was not listed as barrier in our survey (nor is it in the
253 adult survey), and only two people mentioned being on NIV as a barrier in free text responses. Children
254 requiring non-invasive respiratory support are at risk of requiring escalation of care to intubation.
255 Many early guidelines recommended avoiding or limiting enteral nutrition in respiratory distress
256 (American Bronchiolitis Guidelines), however NIV is no longer a barrier to enteral feeding, in
257 accordance with recent updated guidelines (22).

258 Only 4% of the respondents were dietitians, and, the perceived inadequacy of dietitian coverage in
259 PICUs was identified by dietitians and physicians. Specialist dietitians and their educational level vary
260 significantly across countries. Additionally, there are relatively few of these individuals compared to
261 other healthcare professionals, with many European units reporting having no dietitian at all (23).
262 Nutritional support teams (including a dietitian) have been shown to be beneficial in optimising
263 nutrition in PICUs (24). This has been shown in a Latin American and Spanish survey on nutrition in
264 paediatric intensive care where 68% of the participant PICUs had a nutritional support team (NST) and
265 the availability of a NST was associated with better nutritional practices (24). A perceived lack of
266 education around nutrition (and the optimal feeding of critically ill patients) is concerning. In the UK,
267 'nutrition' is a required component of both specialist PICU nursing education and PICU medical
268 trainees, however, how it is taught is variable. In some countries, specialist PICU training programs for
269 doctors or nurses do not exist, and individuals train in adult critical care or anaesthesia, further
270 contributing to their lack of knowledge around pediatric nutrition. In this context, the European
271 Society of Pediatric and Neonatal Intensive Care (ESPNIC) and its nutrition section, has a major role to
272 play in providing education for all professionals.

273 The lack of prioritisation of nutrition over other aspects of care, has been identified as a problem in a
274 recent Australian adult ICU nursing survey (25). In this study, nurses identified their main perceived
275 role related to EN was the care, maintenance and management of EN and being an advocate for EN.

276 When asked to rank their care priorities however, nutrition support and management ranked sixth
277 after physiological monitoring of other systems, but before hygiene and psychological support. They
278 concluded that education (as well as reducing other barriers) could improve nurses' understanding of
279 the importance of nutrition and thus improve the prioritisation of nutrition within the competing
280 demands of their workload. Additionally, a survey investigating barriers in an Israeli hospital found the
281 time it takes to prescribe nutritional therapy, lack of protocols, and awareness of the staff of the
282 nutritional therapy as the main barriers and highlighted the importance of collaboration between the
283 clinical specialities (26). The role of a nutrition support nurse could also be a valuable aspect in a
284 nutritional support team, especially in PICUs without a dietician. This nurse can act as an important
285 player for patients and the healthcare organisation by having enough knowledge, attitudes and
286 competences to fulfil the role of a clinical nutrition expert (27).

287 We found delays in obtaining small bowel access, was also reported as a barrier. Although the pediatric
288 evidence does not show superiority in post-pyloric feeding as the primary feeding method, some units
289 do utilise this method successfully in all patients (28-30). However, most units reserve this method for
290 children intolerant of gastric feeding (23). In the only RCT of EN via gastric versus post-pyloric feeding
291 (30) there was significant crossover and drop out reported in the post-pyloric arm because of inability
292 to place the pyloric tube. Newer devices (31) may assist in ease of correct placement of these tubes
293 in larger children, but others have simply implemented intensive nurse-training to achieve high
294 placement success.

295 One of the most common reasons for failure to deliver enteral nutrition in PICUs is that of feed
296 intolerance (3,12), yet this was not a survey item, and its definition remains problematic (32,33). In
297 our pilot work this item was not suggested to be added, however several free text responses in this
298 worldwide survey did suggest this as an item. Therefore, in future versions of this tool we will consider
299 adding this item.

300 The Canadian Critical Care Nutrition network
301 (<https://www.criticalcarenutrition.com/resources/strategies-for-improving>) who developed the
302 barriers survey as part of a larger nutrition improvement program which focusses around: auditing
303 your own practice, standardising care, identifying barriers, improving nutrition knowledge and having
304 nutrition champions. They argue that this quality improvement survey sought to identify modifiable
305 ICU organisational and healthcare team barriers to the delivery of enteral nutrition, rather than
306 patient-related and subjective factors such as feed intolerance.

307 The differences in perceived barriers by professional groups is interesting and has not been examined
308 before. All three groups perceived fasting prior to procedures and operating department visits as a
309 significant problem. The lack of dietician input was identified by both physicians and dieticians (in the
310 top three barriers), but not nurses. This shows some consistency amongst the three professional
311 groups but reflects their specific professional role around nutrition. Future education and
312 interventions to improve enteral nutrition in PICUs must involve all three of these professional groups.
313 This freely available survey (available in eleven languages on the ESPNIC website [https://espnice-](https://espnice.org/Education/Professional-Resources)
314 [online.org/Education/Professional-Resources](https://espnice.org/Education/Professional-Resources) can now be used by PICUs to firstly identify barriers in
315 their unit, and then target these barriers to improve the delivery of enteral nutrition, as part of a unit-
316 based quality improvement program. This survey tool was adapted to a paediatric ICU population and
317 deliberately excluded neonatal wards, as the organizational, behavioural, clinical and
318 pathophysiological aspect could be different. It would be interesting to evaluate these aspects in
319 future research.

320 There are some limitations of our study that warrant highlighting. Firstly, due to our distribution
321 method via professional networks and organisational websites and newsletters we are unable to know
322 a denominator and thus calculate a response rate or rule out possible selection bias. Secondly,
323 because of this we were also unable to control for the variation in response rates from different
324 countries, thus we had significantly more European responses. As we adapted the adult survey for

325 pediatric use, we did not add questions to the survey regarding nutritional protocols or nutritional
326 teams available in the PICU, nor did we ask whether the respondents felt the perceived barriers to
327 actually causing inadequate feeding. However, the strengths of our study are our extensive responses
328 (920 across 57 countries) and in our inclusion of all three professional groups involved in the delivery
329 of enteral nutrition. Unfortunately, the responses from dietitians were lower, which prevented us
330 making firm conclusions regarding this group. Furthermore, our translation into multiple languages
331 ensured the survey did not just reach an English-speaking group, a bias in many other surveys.

332 **Conclusions**

333 This study has demonstrated that many perceived barriers to enteral feeding remain in pediatric
334 intensive care units internationally. These are similar, but not the same as those in adult ICUs. These
335 barriers relate to organisational and staff factors as well as patient factors relating to their clinical
336 status. Whether the barrier is real or not, if clinicians believe these, then this still inhibits the delivery
337 of enteral nutrition. Generating evidence to support or refute these perceived barriers is ongoing, but
338 further education to improve awareness of the existing evidence and facilitate the implementation of
339 best evidence into local unit guidelines is required. The use of local feeding guidelines with or without
340 nutrition support teams, have been shown to be effective in promoting enteral nutrition and as such
341 should be encouraged. Physicians, nurses and dieticians must all be involved in this process and in
342 actively addressing barriers in their PICU.

343

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| 355 | Acquisition of data: Georgia Harrison and Lyvonne Tume |
| 356 | Analysis and interpretation of data: Lyvonne Tume, Renate Eveleens, Frederic Valla, Jos Latour, |
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| 361 | Statistical analysis: Lyvonne Tume and Renate Eveleens |
| 362 | |
| 363 | |

364 **Table and Figure legends**

365 **Table 1:** Characteristics of the responders

366 **Table 2:** Descriptive statistics of Barriers for Enteral Nutrition survey

367 **Table 3:** Top 3 barriers to deliver enteral nutrition in the PICU reported by professional group

368 **Table 4.** Differences in perceived important barriers by professional group

369 **Table 5.** Differences in perceived important barrier by PICU type

370 **Table 6.** Differences in perceived important barrier across Europe

371 **Figure 1:** Countries of which the survey correspondents work

372

373 **Supplementary Files**

374 **Supplemental Figure 1:** Barriers to Delivery of Enteral Nutrition in PICU survey

375

376 **Supplement file 2:** Differences in perceived barriers by years' experience

377 **Supplementary file 3:** Differences in perceived important barrier across the world

378

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