

Let's Visit Paediatric and Neonatal Intensive Care Units



A book for families and friends
By Shelley Marsh

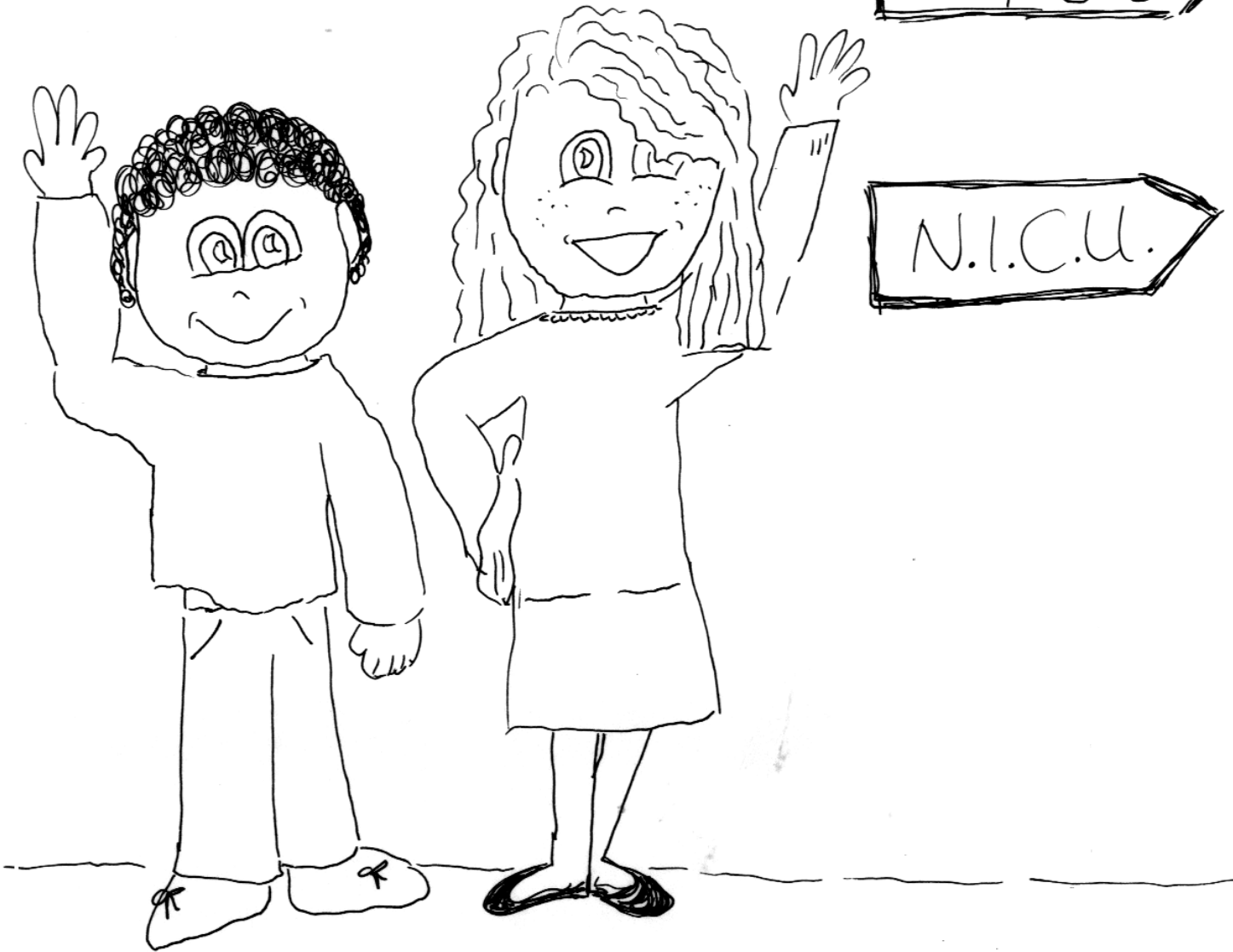


Written by Shelley Marsh, mother and lay member of the PICANet PIC Families Group



P.I.C.U.

N.I.C.U.



Rachel and Nathan are spending the day in PICU and NICU.

'The names sound like cartoon characters!' said Nathan.

'Yes, ' laughed Rachel 'but the names are letters that are made into words. PICU means Paediatric Intensive Care Unit and NICU means Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.'

'Paediatric is about children and neonatal is babies, right?' asked Nathan.

'That's right. Neonatal also includes babies who are born too early. They are called premature babies. I think we will see some premature babies in the NICU.' said Rachel. 'If we are going to be doctors one day, we need to know what happens in both PICU and NICU, so let's get a move on!' 'I want to be a nurse, not a doctor.' Nathan said.

'Well, I have my heart set on being a doctor!' Rachel exclaimed. 'I was born prematurely and spent some time in NICU myself.'

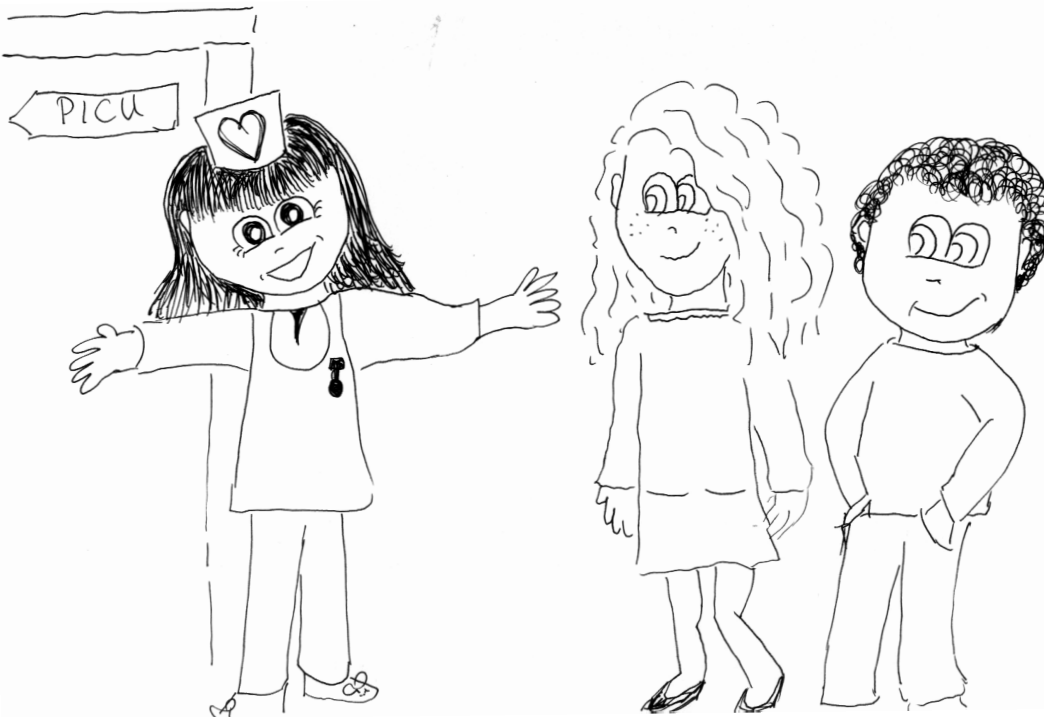
'Really?' Nathan asked. 'How cool is that!'

Rachel and Nathan pressed the buzzer outside the unit. No one answered. They pressed again.

'What's taking them so long to let us in?' Nathan asked.

'Well, I guess everyone is busy taking care of the children. Be patient, Nathan!' Just as Rachel said that, the door was opened by a nurse. 'Hello! I'm Nurse Poppy. You must be Nathan and Rachel. Good to meet you both. Welcome to the unit.'

Nurse Poppy took Rachel and Nathan to some sinks and showed them where to put their coats as well as where to wash their hands. Rachel and Nathan had to put special gel on their hands to make them as clean and germ free as possible.





'This helps lower the spread of infection,' said Nathan, as he spread the gel on his hands.

'It doesn't smell so great though,' said Rachel, wrinkling up her nose.

Nurse Poppy laughed and then took the children through into the unit. There was a large reception area, called a nurses' station which had a few computers, some telephones and lots of papers. The doctors and nurses used that area as a base where they sat together on the unit. The unit was brightly coloured and there was a notice board that had lots of photos and cards that people had sent to the doctors and nurses, thanking them for caring for so many children and babies.

There was a small room that said 'relatives' room' on the door as well as a place where visitors could make themselves a drink. Some of the children were in rooms called cubicles and some were in a larger, open area that was divided into more private spaces by curtains. The curtains were made of blue material and each space had a bed, with lots of machines around the child in that bed. Rachel and Nathan found it hard not to stare at the beds and each patient in them.

'I think there is a lot to see here' Rachel said ' and a lot to learn if we are going to become intensive care staff in the future, Nathan. "Yes, ' Nathan agreed 'but it's important not to stare at the children here. It's not a very private place but everyone needs their privacy just the same. It's different from other wards we have visited in the hospital because the children here are really unwell. The children can't get up and play like on most other children's wards.'

Nurse Poppy nodded her head.

'You're both being very sensitive and that is incredibly helpful in PICU and NICU. It's not an easy place to be for our children, or their families. OK, let me start to show you what we do here. I want you to ask me lots of questions so that you can find out all about our work.'



'My first question is how many nurses look after each child?' asked Nathan.

Nurse Poppy thought for a moment and then said

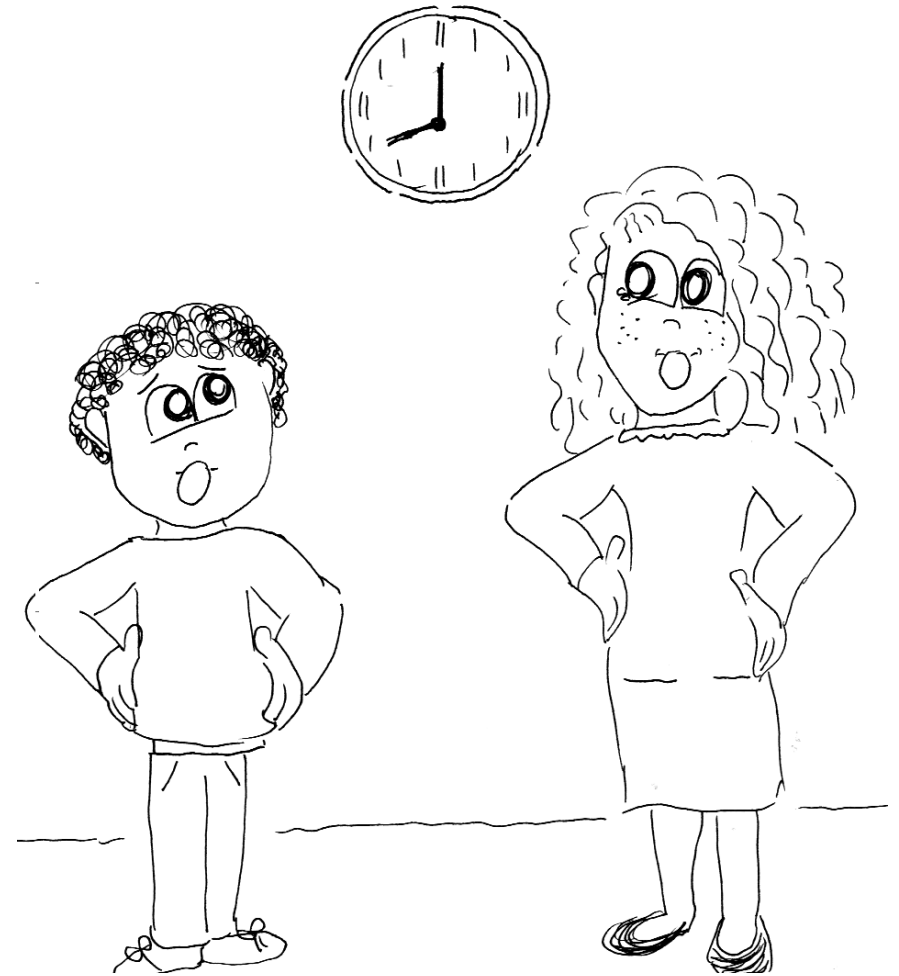
'Each hospital works in a bit of a different way. But at this hospital each child had their own nurse who cares for them for that day'.

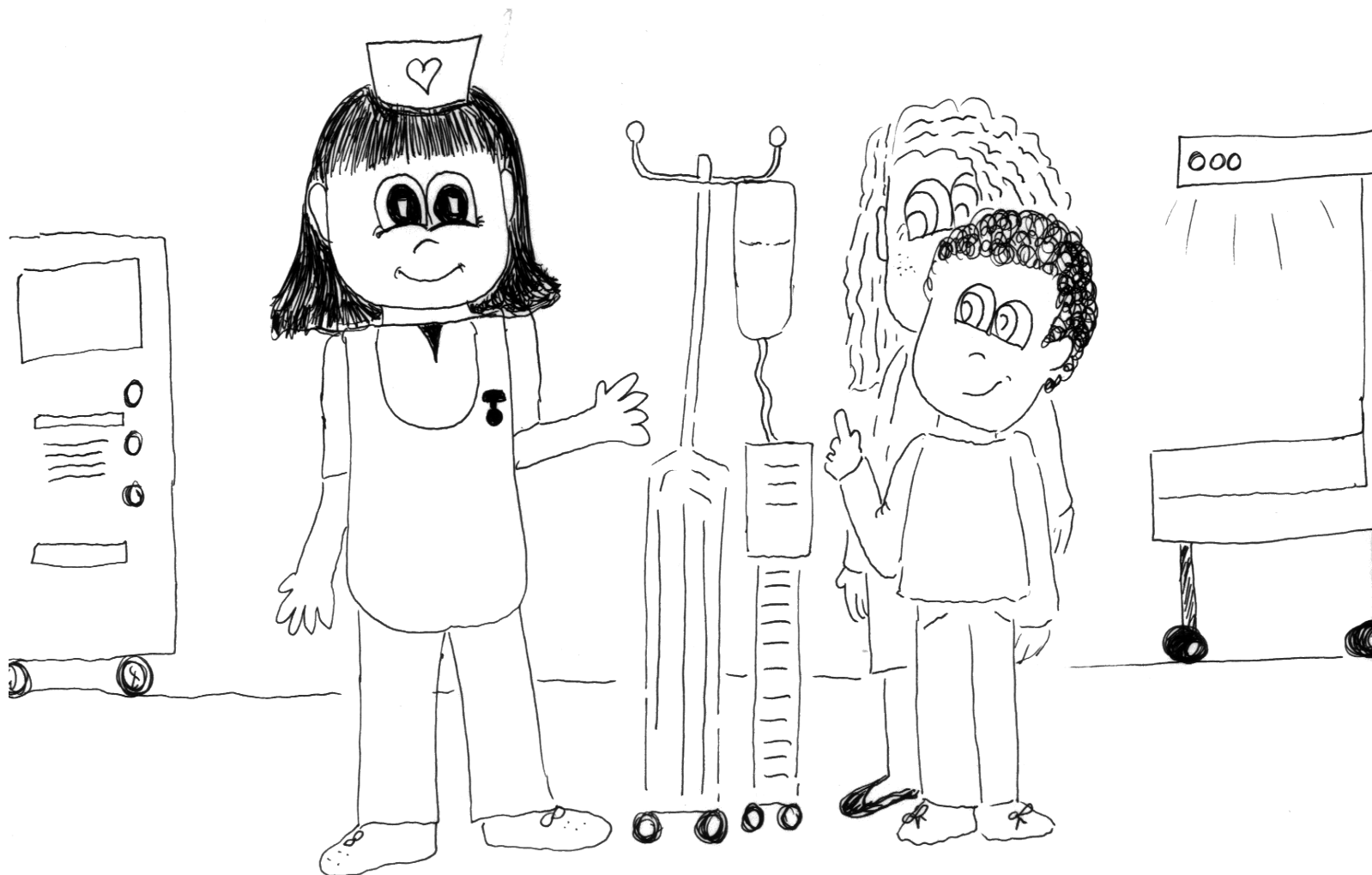
'What time do the nurses go home at the end of the day?' Rachel asked

'In this hospital, the nurses start at 8 in the morning and go home at 8 in the evening. Another nurse comes and does the night shift at 8 in the evening and works through the night until 8 in the morning.'

'Gosh, that's a long time.' Rachel said. 'Does each child have their own doctor too? You know, I am planning on being a doctor when I'm older'

'Each child is cared for by a whole team of different people,' Nurse Poppy explained, 'and the doctors, nurses and all the others here in the unit work together to help each child and each baby. The team are specially trained to look after children and babies who are very sick'





Nurse Poppy showed the children some of the equipment that the medical team use in PICU and NICU.

She showed Rachel and Nathan lots of machines. Nurse Poppy explained 'They all do different things and some of them make some very odd noises.'

Rachel noticed that the beds and cots are very different from the ones at home. Nurse Poppy explained that some babies have heaters above their cots and some beds have mattresses that are filled with air. Those beds and cots help the children to stay at a comfortable temperature – not too hot and not too cold.



'My duvet at home is always too hot!' says Nathan.

'Well, we don't want that to happen here,' laughed Nurse Poppy, 'we need to make sure that we can help our patients stay at just the right temperature.'

Nurse Poppy showed the children a machine called a ventilator. The ventilator goes into the child's mouth or nose and helps them to breathe if it is hard for them to breathe by themselves.

'Is it true that if a child is using a ventilator, they can't talk or cry?' Nathan asked, sadly.

'Yes, some children communicate using computers so the nurses and doctors understand what they need' said Nurse Poppy. 'sometimes our patients can't cough either, which makes it hard to get rid of spit so a nurse will use a long, bendy straw called a suction catheter to suck

up all the spit. That makes a gurgling noise too. You know we love funny noises here!' laughed Nurse Poppy. Rachel and Nathan giggled.

'It seems to me that most things on PICU and NICU make a funny noise.' Nathan laughed.

'Is it the oxygen, the special air that helps the child breathe, that makes the noise?' asked Rachel. 'Not quite,' answered Nurse Poppy. 'Try this one on.' she said, and she put a small mask over Rachel's nose and mouth for her to try out. The mask didn't make a noise and Rachel said it actually felt quite comfortable.

'Oxygen helps people breathe and I can see there are a lot of different ways of helping someone to do that.' Rachel added. Nathan had noticed that there was a small baby who was lying inside a clear box, a bit like a cot. The cot was attached to a special oxygen tap on the wall so that the baby was also getting oxygen just by resting in his cot.

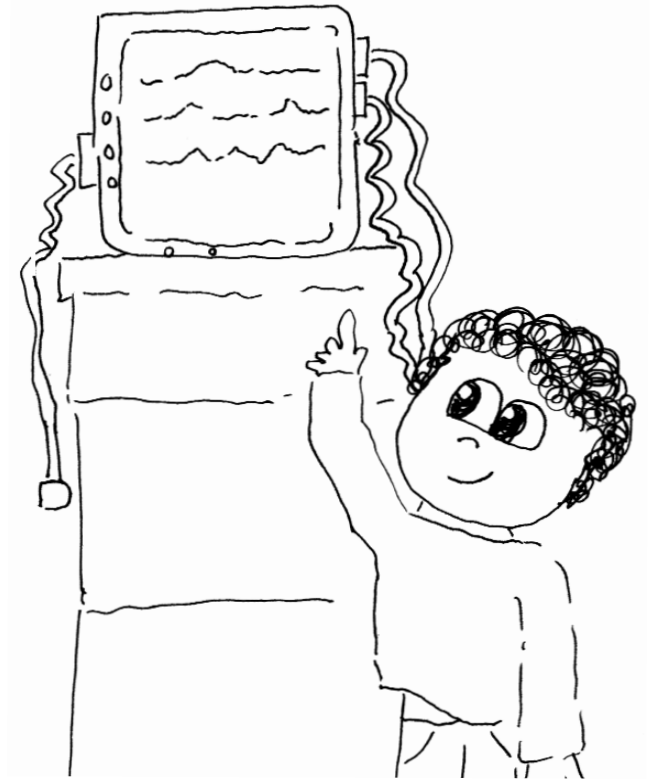
'That special cot is helping that cute baby to breathe, isn't it?' asked Nathan.

'Yes,' said Nurse Poppy, 'let's move on and watch some television!'

'Watch television?' squealed Rachel and Nathan at the same time.

'Well, sometimes brothers and sisters who visit do watch telly here on the unit but the machines that look like a television above each child's bed are actually called monitors and they show the medical team lots of important information. The monitor shows the child's heart beat, how quickly they are breathing and even how hot or cold they are. The monitors bleep quite a lot too.

Another noise!'



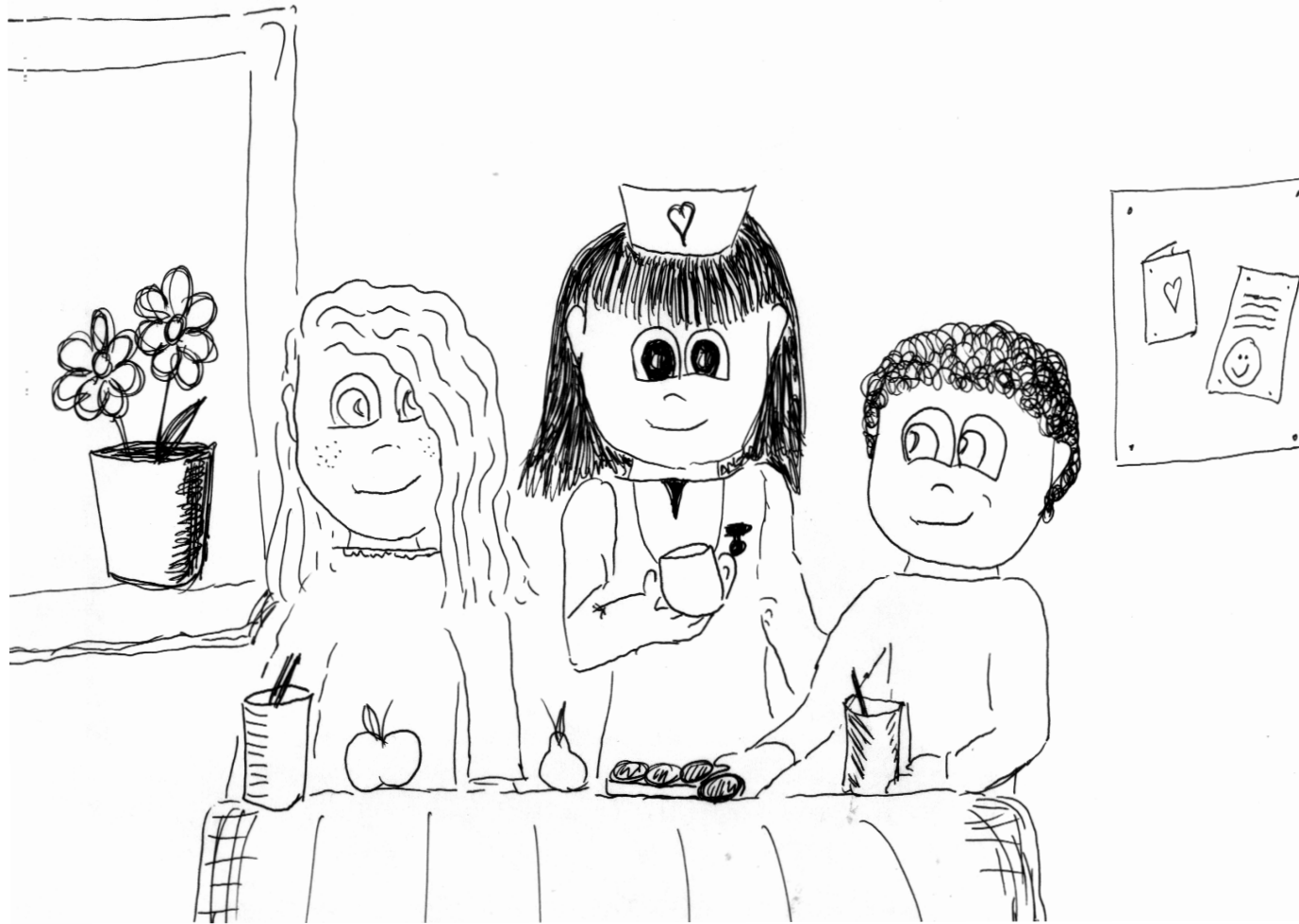
Nurse Poppy showed Nathan how to measure Rachel's heart beat and blood pressure with a special plastic bandage and then Rachel checked Nathan's oxygen levels by putting a small red glowing clip on Nathan's finger.

'Those things don't hurt' Nathan said. 'and the doctors and nurses know what's happening with each patient. That's clever stuff.'



'Those pieces of equipment give us a good idea on how each child is at any time,' Nurse Poppy explained, 'then we decide which medicines to give. Many of the children and babies in PICU and NICU have their medicine given to them through a tube called a drip. The drips are usually put into the child's arms or legs. The medicines then go straight into the blood, which helps the medicines to work more quickly. The drips have pumps to make them work and the pumps have a few lights that flash on and off.'

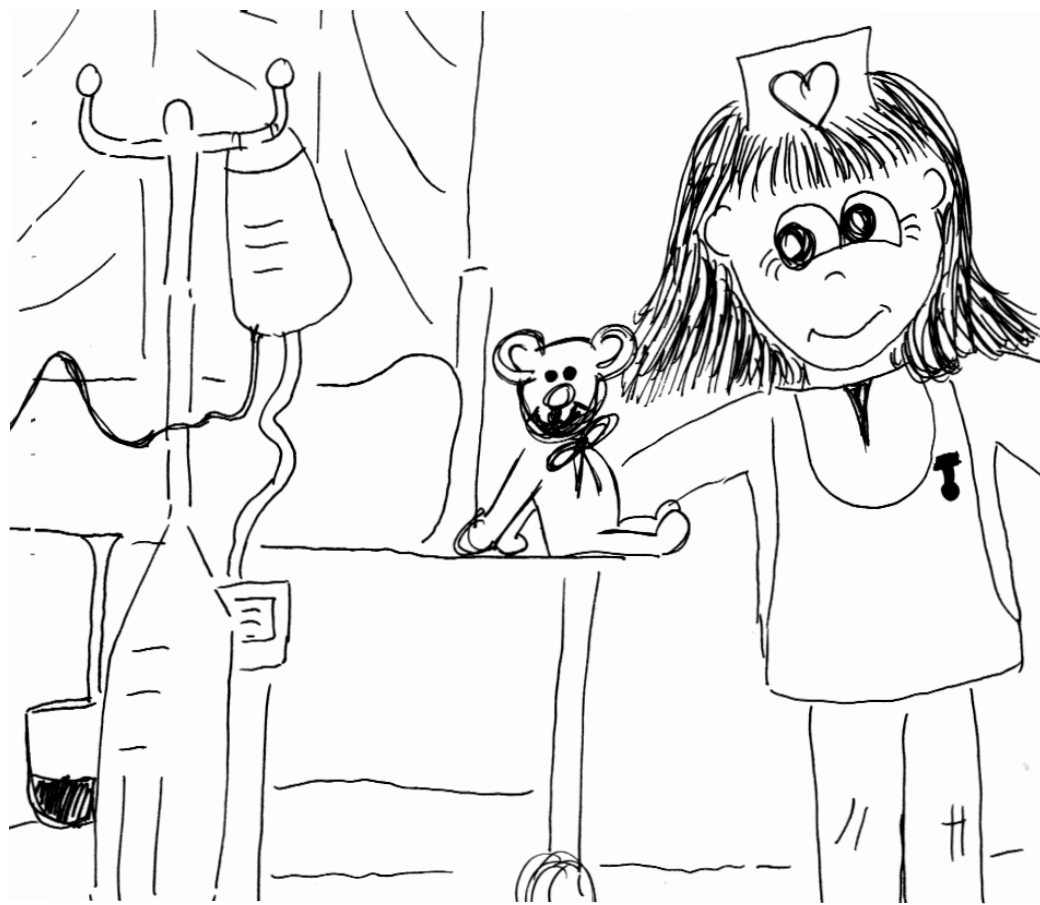
'There are a lot of machines that you need to understand when you're a doctor or a nurse!' 'That's true,' said Nurse Poppy 'NICU and PICU often feel very busy because the doctors and nurses check things all the time. Are you two hungry, do you want to go and get a snack?'



Nathan smiled and Rachel nodded. Nurse Poppy took them to the relatives' room to sit down and have a break from all the new things they had seen so far. 'It's quite scary here in some ways, isn't it?' said Nathan, as he took a big gulp of apple juice. 'It's very different from anything I have ever seen before really. It must be stressful for the mums and dads too' said Rachel, nibbling at a biscuit.

"I suppose it is.' Nurse Poppy agreed ' and many families that have children in PICU or NICU didn't plan to come here, so it is often a bit of a shock for people.' Rachel and Nathan finished up their snacks. Nathan thought for a moment as he ate up his last mouthful.

'What do the children eat here in PICU? I have heard hospital food isn't very good!' Nurse Poppy laughed.

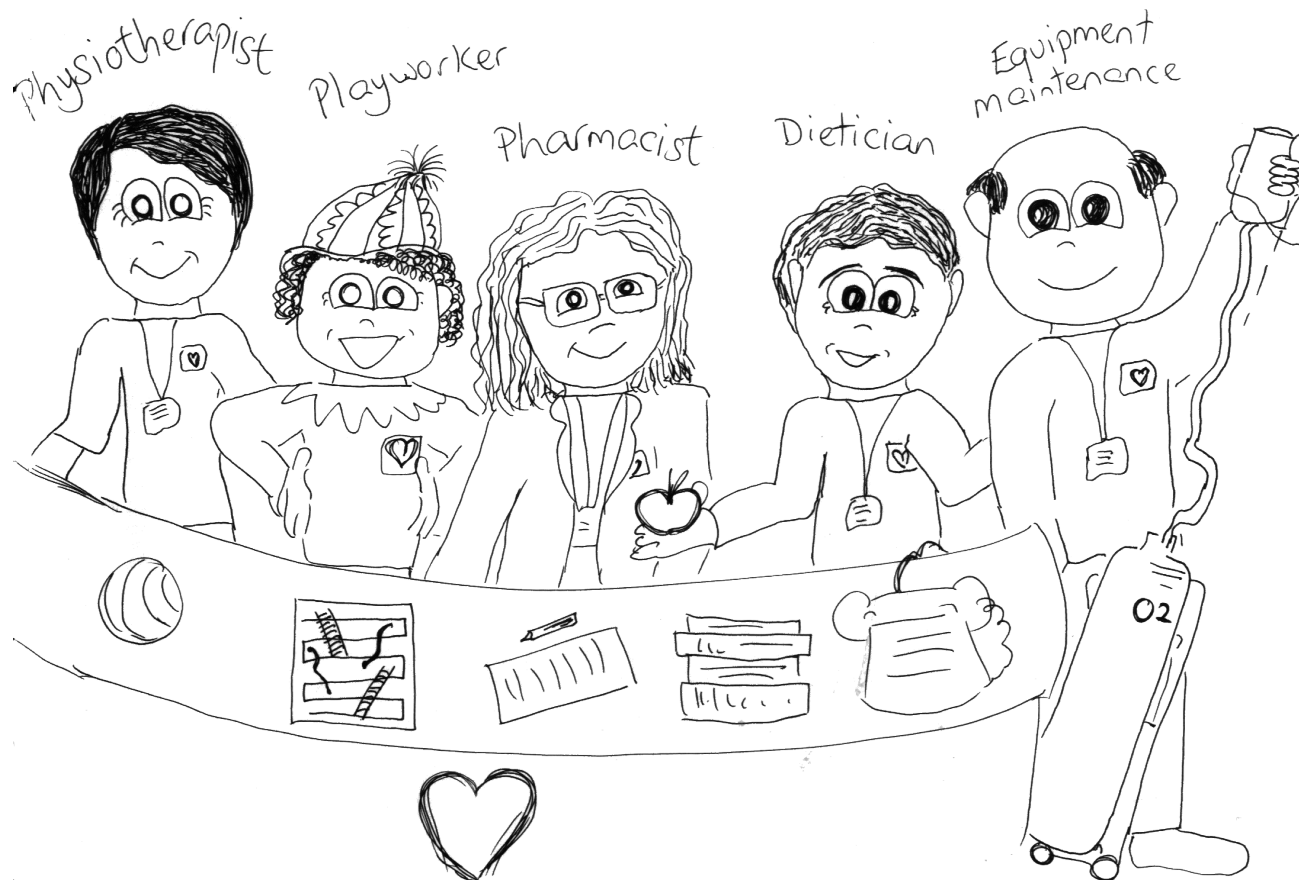


'I think you might be right! But in PICU, the children are usually asleep from the medicines they have been given, so they don't often have drinks or eat snacks like we have just had. Many of our patients have their food in a liquid, which goes through tubes. Sometimes the tubes go up their noses or straight into their tummies.

'If they are asleep, how do the children get up to go to the toilet? Nathan wanted to know.

'Great question, ' Nurse Poppy said, ' to stop the children feeling uncomfortable, the nurse puts a small tube called a catheter into the patient, that takes the wee directly into a bag. You can see those bags by the side of beds.'

Nurse Poppy, Rachel and Nathan went back to the main nurses' station. There were lots of different people at the nurses' station. Rachel asked people what their jobs were and was surprised to learn that there were people who worked out the diet for each child, people who work out the oxygen each person needed, people who helped children to move more easily. There were people on the unit who spoke to families and made all sorts of arrangements for the children in their care.



It had been a long day and Rachel and Nathan were tired and ready to go home. They thanked Nurse Poppy for all the questions she had answered and said they both wanted to learn even more as they got older.

'Both PICU and NICU are very unusual places,' said Rachel. 'I am glad that we have met so many people who have had such a lot of training and skill. They do the best they can to help children and babies who are very unwell.'

'I hope you have found it interesting, visiting the unit today,' said Nurse Poppy. 'You will both need to work really hard at school to become the doctors and nurses, but I am sure you'll make it.'

'Thank you so much, Nurse Poppy. You do an amazing job. When I am a doctor, I hope I will get to work with you.' Rachel said.

'Thank you, Nurse Poppy. It has been fascinating to see how all those machines help your patients. I hope that when I get to be a nurse I will be able to remember which one does what.' Nathan added.

'It was great to meet you both. I'm going to go back to a ward round now, that's a meeting with all the team to see how each patient is getting on. Take care.'



Nurse Poppy went back to the unit and carried on working with the other staff in her team, caring for the children and babies in PICU and NICU.

'You know, Rachel,' Nathan said, 'it can't be easy needing to be in an intensive care unit but with lovely nurses like Nurse Poppy caring for the children and babies there, it must be a bit easier.'

'I think you're right, Nathan. I hope that everyone, in every hospital, gets better soon.' Rachel smiled at Nathan and they headed home.



www.picanet.org.uk