

## Necrotising Enterocolitis

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## INTRODUCTION

Necrotising enterocolitis (NEC) is a devastating disease of infants and the commonest gastrointestinal emergency in the newborn period. It is a condition characterised by intestinal necrosis affecting the ileum and/or colon. There is a wide spectrum of clinical manifestations. In the least severe cases there may be mild inflammation of the intestinal wall in a baby with mild abdominal distension and minimal systemic upset. The most severely affected cases, however, may show evidence of full thickness intestinal necrosis with perforation, respiratory and cardiovascular collapse, multi-system organ failure and in some cases death.

The term 'necrotizing enterocolitis' first appeared in the European literature in the 1950s when Schmid and Quaiser described infants dying from necrotic lesions of the gastrointestinal tract [1]. However, it was not until the 1960s, when Santulli *et al* reported a series of 64 infants with NEC that it became recognized as a distinct clinical entity [2]. Since then, the condition has been increasingly recognised, at least partly due to the advances made in neonatal care in the past 40 years and the increasing survival of infants at the extremes of prematurity creating a larger population at risk of developing NEC.

Currently, the reported incidence of NEC varies from 0.5 to 5 per 1000 live births [3] but NEC is predominantly a disease of preterm infants and those of low birth weight. The incidence is as high as 14% in infants less than 1000g [4] and more than 90% of affected infants are born prematurely. Despite several decades of active research in the field of NEC, the mortality rate remains unchanged [5] and is over 30% in infants weighing less than 1000g [6]. New treatments are desperately needed to improve outcome from this devastating condition.

## PATHOGENESIS AND RISK FACTORS

Several theories and mechanisms of injury have been proposed to explain the aetiology of NEC. However, despite over 30 years of research the aetiology remains unclear and no single mechanism at present can account for the pathogenesis in all cases. The interaction of multiple factors is likely to be responsible in the majority of cases. Several risk factors have been shown to be associated with NEC, and others implicated by strong association. Intestinal immaturity of premature infants, particularly those of extremely low birth weight, is thought to be central to the pathogenesis, although the precise nature of this immaturity and the mechanisms by which disease ensues are unclear. Proposed risk factors are summarised in *Table 1*.

### Peripartum events

There are several risk factors related to pre- and peri- natal events which are associated with NEC. Absent or reversed end diastolic blood flow in the umbilical artery has been reported as a predisposing factor [7] most likely due to creating a degree of chronic relative intestinal ischaemia. In addition there is an association with maternal eclampsia, fetal distress and premature rupture of membranes. In the immediate postnatal period, risk factors include asphyxia, hypothermia, respiratory distress syndrome, apnoeic episodes, cyanotic congenital heart disease, persistent fetal circulation, persistent ductus arteriosus and sepsis. It is likely that all result at least in part in a degree of relative intestinal ischaemia or hypoxia perhaps predisposing the infant to developing NEC in the presence of subsequent risk factors.

### Feeding regimen

The majority of infants who develop NEC have been fed enterally. There is often pressure to provide feeds of increased calorific density in order to meet the growth requirements of the premature neonate. Such feeds are often hyperosmolar and may result in mucosal damage in the pre-existing immature intestine and thereby contributing to the development of NEC. Breast milk appears to

offer some protection against NEC, probably as a result of its immunologically active components including immunoglobulins, cytokines and complement proteins [8;9].

### **Altered blood supply**

NEC has been associated with a number of predisposing factors which are believed to result in intestinal vascular insufficiency and subsequent selective mesenteric ischaemia. The causes of this vascular insufficiency include pre- and perinatal stress (e.g. reversed umbilical arterial blood flow, maternal pre-eclampsia), umbilical catheterization, exchange transfusion, congenital cardiac disease and indomethacin treatment. This results in the loss of the protective mucosal barrier, autodigestion and presents an opportunity for bacterial invasion. In addition to these associations, evidence for a vascular component in the aetiology of NEC comes from an experimental animal model in which a disease like NEC is observed following an intestinal ischaemia reperfusion injury [10].

### **Bacterial involvement**

While the precise role of bacterial agents in the development of NEC is unclear, several factors their involvement. Occasionally NEC is seen to occur in clusters, in which a higher than expected number of cases are observed in one centre [11]. Identical organisms are grown from babies within these clusters and the initiation of infection control measures has been shown to control such outbreaks [12]. However, different organisms are grown from separate outbreaks so it cannot be claimed that a single organism is involved in development of NEC. Bacterial involvement in the pathogenesis of NEC is also implicated by association; endotoxaemia [13;14] and positive blood cultures are common in infants with NEC and the gastrointestinal pneumatosis found in NEC contains 30% hydrogen, a gas produced solely by bacterial metabolism [15]. Furthermore, in experimental animals, an NEC-like illness can be induced by ingestion of *Clostridium* species [16] and administration of bacterial endotoxin [17;18].

## **PREVENTION**

A variety of interventions have been proposed to prevent NEC. This is the most logical approach to combating a disease for which there are no specific therapies. Given the multifactorial aetiology of the disease any intervention decreasing the incidence of one of the recognized risk factors may decrease the incidence of NEC. Although interventions such as immunoglobulin administration [19] or prophylactic enteral antibiotics have been shown to reduce incidence of NEC in individual studies, subsequent reviews and concerns over adverse effects have precluded their widespread usage [20;21].

Other novel agents have been suggested for the prevention of NEC including lactoferrin [22], recombinant erythropoietin [23], glutamine [24] and arginine [25]. Whilst there is some evidence to support a reduction in incidence of NEC with these compounds, the mechanisms of action are unclear and may be attributable to other secondary effects. None is in current widespread use, although further studies of these and other agents are warranted.

The most robust evidence for interventions to prevent development of NEC exists for the administration of probiotics and modulation of feeding regimes in infants at highest risk of NEC. The role of bacteria in the pathogenesis of NEC has led investigators to determine the effect of probiotics on the incidence on NEC. Several randomised controlled trials have demonstrated a significant reduction in incidence of NEC following routine probiotic administration [26;27] and meta-analysis of these studies appears to confirm this exciting finding [28]. However, concern has been expressed that currently sufficient evidence may still be lacking to support widespread adoption of this practice as existing studies do not include the highest risk population of extremely low birth weight infants - who are also at greatest risk of side effects of probiotics. Furthermore, there remain unanswered

questions as to which probiotic should be used and at what dose [29]. It is hoped that outcomes of ongoing randomised controlled trials may address these issues.

There is little doubt that one of the most important preventative measures is that of feeding infants at risk of NEC with breast milk as opposed to formula milk. This effect has been known for more than 20 years [8], but despite changes in infant formula, breast milk still appears to offer significant protection [9;30]. Quigley *et al*, in a Cochrane review, demonstrated a significantly lower incidence of NEC in human milk-fed infants [31]. If fortification of breast milk is necessary to achieve adequate growth then a fortifier based on human milk appears to lower the incidence of NEC (and NEC requiring surgery) compared to a cow's milk based fortifier [30]. However, availability of either human milk and/or human milk based products is problematic.

In addition to this it has been a long held belief that the time at which enteral feeds are first introduced and the rate at which they are increased may affect the incidence of NEC. In an attempt to demonstrate this definitively, several groups have recently published results of well-designed randomised controlled trials investigating the effect of early versus delayed enteral feeding in infants at risk of NEC [32;33]. Whilst both demonstrated a trend towards reduction in incidence of NEC with delayed enteral feeding, neither study in isolation demonstrated a statistically significant effect, and current meta-analyses do not support the use of a delayed introduction or slower rate of enteral feeds to prevent NEC.

Clusters of cases of NEC have been described, and anecdotally there is marked geographic variation in prevalence between countries and/or centres. How much of this is due to differences in feeding practise or other aspects of neonatal care, and how much of it may be due to genetic or environmental factors is unknown. Although there is some evidence that certain genotypes may predispose infants to NEC [34-36], the effects of these genotypes are not strong and most of the studies have been relatively small-scale.

### *CLINICAL FEATURES AND DIAGNOSIS*

Infants with NEC usually display both specific and non-specific gastrointestinal signs. In the early stages of the disease, abdominal distension with or without tenderness, feeding intolerance with increased gastric residuals, vomiting and occult blood in the stools may all be present. These findings may become more severe as the disease progresses to include abdominal wall oedema, erythema and ascites. A small proportion of infants with NEC present with a palpable abdominal mass (usually due to matted loops of bowel around an area of gangrene or perforation) and/or persistent intestinal obstruction.

In addition to these gastrointestinal signs, generalized non-specific signs indicative of systemic deterioration or sepsis are often present. In their mildest form, these include temperature instability, hypovolaemia, tachycardia, and mild respiratory distress. In more advanced disease, clinical features of a systemic inflammatory response frequently develop including hypotension requiring inotropes, respiratory failure requiring ventilatory support, coagulopathy and renal failure.

Whilst there are no defining laboratory parameters of use in the diagnosis of NEC, a number of haematological and biochemical abnormalities may be observed including raised or depressed white cell count, thrombocytopenia, metabolic acidosis, glucose instability and elevated C-reactive protein levels [14;37-39], although none of these are universally present in all cases. There also potentially some other more specific markers of intestinal damage, such as intestinal fatty-acid binding protein [40;41], but these are not yet suitable for routine clinical use.

Radiographic imaging is essential in the diagnosis of NEC. The pathognomonic radiological finding is that of pneumatosis intestinalis (*Figure 1*) representing gas within the wall of the bowel, which is believed to originate from pathogenic bacteria. If this gas becomes absorbed into the mesenteric circulation it may result in the presence of portal venous gas seen as a narrow, linear air-dense area in the hepatic region on X-ray. The most significant radiological finding is that of pneumoperitoneum (*Figure 2*) resulting from intestinal perforation, as this is a clear indication that surgery is required. Free air may be seen in a number of ways including:

- The football sign (free gas outlining the falciform ligament and umbilical arteries)
- As a triangular gas shadow clearly not within the intestinal lumen often bordered by the subhepatic space and hepatorenal fossa
- As Rigler's sign, in which there is clear visualization of the outer as well as the inner wall of a loop of bowel

In many cases the identification of perforation is challenging and a lateral decubitus or lateral shoot through radiograph may be useful (*Figure 3*). There are cases in which intestinal perforation may be represented by a completely gasless abdomen and it is not unusual to find a sealed perforation at laparotomy in the absence of free air on the abdominal radiograph. An abdominal ultrasound scan may be helpful for diagnosis in these cases. Colour doppler ultrasound has been advocated in some centres, but this requires specific training [42;43] and has the disadvantage of being very operator dependent.

## STAGING

This combination of clinical features, laboratory indices and radiological findings have been grouped together to form a staging system (*Figure 4*) for NEC known as Bell's staging [44]. The use of such a staging system has been used by some surgeons to select the most appropriate treatment but its value is probably greatest in defining severity of disease in determining the effectiveness of therapy on survival and outcome. Some authors have attempted to define staging on the basis of only radiographic findings [45], but this has not found widespread usage.

## CLINICAL MANAGEMENT

### Medical management

Most infants with suspected (Bell's Stage 1) or less advanced (Stage 2A or B) NEC are managed non-surgically although they may require intensive medical care. This may be described as predominantly supportive as there are no specific treatments for NEC. This supportive treatment includes appropriate ventilatory support, adequate fluid resuscitation, inotropic support as required and correction of acid-base imbalance, coagulopathy, and thrombocytopenia. The intestine is rested and decompressed with a nasogastric tube and broad spectrum antibiotics are given usually for 7-10 days. Antibiotics may be modified appropriately in light of microbiological culture results.

Although there are no specific therapies for NEC, various therapeutic agents or manoeuvres have been tested in experimental models of NEC. These include captopril [46], platelet activating factor antagonists [47], moderate controlled hypothermia [48], and stem cells [49;50]. However, because of the experimental models studied, it is not clear whether some of these agents are effective at prevention or as therapy. Of note, moderate therapeutic hypothermia was found to be feasible and safe in infants with NEC [51] and a randomised controlled trial to test effectiveness is currently in progress (CoolNEC).

Serial clinical and radiological examination is of extreme importance to monitor progression of disease and detect any evidence of intestinal perforation or other indication for surgical

intervention. In the absence of such indication, medical management should continue for 7-10 days depending on severity of illness. Following this, feeds may be slowly reintroduced paying particular attention to feed intolerance suggestive of a repeat episode of NEC or intestinal stricture. From the time of diagnosis to re-establishment of full enteral feeds it is essential to maintain nutritional input with parenteral nutrition (PN) adequate for tissue healing and repair, and body growth.

### **Surgical management**

Despite aggressive medical treatment, a proportion of infants with NEC require acute surgical intervention. Surgeons differ over indications for surgery since there is the potential to cause serious harm by operating on a fragile, critically unwell preterm infant [52]. Indications for surgery are listed in *Table 2*.

The principles of surgical treatment for acute NEC are to remove necrotic intestine and control intra-abdominal sepsis whilst preserving as much intestinal length as possible. Within these principles, a number of surgical options exist and the procedure of choice is somewhat contentious. The traditional surgical approach to NEC has been to perform a laparotomy, resect all areas of necrotic intestine and exteriorize the bowel to allow adequate time for healing and growth before restoring intestinal continuity at a later stage. However, stomas, and in particular ileostomies are poorly tolerated by preterm infants as they may predispose to nutritional and metabolic disturbances and poor growth as a consequence of fluid and electrolyte depletion. Some surgeons therefore advocate primary anastomosis following intestinal resection for NEC wherever possible and this is feasible even in small, critically unwell infants [53]. However, there is no good evidence to support one approach over the other. In children who are unstable during surgery or have intra-operative complications such as haemorrhage the quickest approach is usually preferable; this is usually to fashion a stoma.

Some children have more than one section of bowel affected by NEC, so-called multifocal disease. For this a number of operations have been proposed including multiple resections and multiple primary anastomoses. A 'clip and drop' approach may also be useful in multifocal disease followed 24-48hrs later by a 'second-look' laparotomy [54].

Unfortunately a number of infants present at laparotomy with extensive or panintestinal NEC. Surgical options in this scenario are limited and many surgeons would consider withdrawing care faced with an infant with panintestinal gangrene (NEC totalis). However, some infants with very extensive disease may benefit from a high diverting jejunostomy [55].

A final surgical manoeuvre used in infants with perforated NEC is placement of a peritoneal drain. Primary peritoneal drainage (PPD) was initially proposed as a method of stabilizing infants with intestinal perforation prior to definitive surgical treatment [56]. Subsequently, it was reported as definitive treatment for intestinal perforation as some infants required no further surgical treatment [57;58]. There have been two recent prospective randomised controlled trials investigating the use of PPD in infants with perforated NEC compared to laparotomy [59;60]. Neither definitely demonstrated an advantage of either PPD or laparotomy over the other, and this was also true when a meta-analysis of the two trials was performed ([59]; *Figure 5*). However, one study concluded that PPD was not an effective definitive procedure for perforated NEC as its use was followed by a rescue laparotomy in approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the infants [59]. Whether there remains a role for PPD in the stabilisation of a critically unwell child with perforated NEC and respiratory compromise prior to transfer to another centre for a laparotomy remains unclear [61].

The authors' proposed surgical management of NEC is illustrated in *Figure 6*.

## OUTCOME

Despite intensive medical and surgical treatment a number of infants do not survive the acute episode of NEC. These fall broadly into two groups: those who have panintestinal disease whose intestine cannot be salvaged and those who have surgically and medically and treatable disease but who develop a significant inflammatory response syndrome resulting in multi-organ dysfunction syndrome. Whilst overall mortality from NEC is may be as high as 35%, birth weight is a significant determinant predictor of mortality such that the mortality from NEC is as high as 42% in infants born <750g [6]. With increasing birth weight, mortality from NEC decreases (*Figure 7*). However, the mortality of those infants requiring surgery does not seem to be birth weight dependent [5].

In those who survive the acute episode of NEC, a proportion will develop an intestinal stricture either related to medically treated NEC or at the site of a previous anastomosis. Surgical resection of such strictures is usually necessary. Longer term outcome is related to remaining intestinal length and its capacity for adequate nutrient absorption. Malabsorption may result from a variety of factors including gut dysmotility, enzyme deficiency, abnormal intestinal mucosa, bacterial overgrowth, decreased bowel length and vitamin B12 deficiency secondary to ileal resection. Short bowel syndrome is the most serious gastrointestinal complication associated with NEC and great efforts are taken to avoid resection of more bowel length than is absolutely necessary. Supporters of resection and primary anastomosis cite this as one of the advantages over stoma formation.

PN-related complications are commonly encountered in infants with NEC and include sepsis, suppression of the immune response and impairment of liver function. Standard strategies to minimise the risk of these complications are used aggressively as some of these infants may have a long term PN dependency.

In addition to the intestinal sequelae of NEC, it is being increasingly recognised that NEC has a deleterious neurodevelopmental effect, the mechanisms of which are not understood [62;63]. Whilst it is recognised that many preterm infants suffer from neurodevelopmental impairment, neurodevelopmental outcome appears worse in infants who have had NEC. In addition to the intestinal function following NEC it is essential that this important outcome measure is monitored as we strive towards novel therapeutic strategies that are desperately needed.

## **Table 1 – Proposed risk factors for NEC**

### **Peripartum events**

- absent or reversed end diastolic umbilical artery blood flow
- maternal eclampsia
- fetal distress
- premature rupture of membranes
- delivery by Caesarean section
- perinatal asphyxia
- perinatal hypothermia

### **Neonatal period**

- respiratory distress syndrome
- apnoeic episodes
- congenital heart disease
- persistent fetal circulation,
- persistent ductus arteriosus (PDA)
- sepsis
- umbilical catheterisation
- exchange transfusion
- NSAID treatment of PDA

### **Feeding regimen**

- formula feed (as opposed to breast milk)
- high density milk formulae
- early enteral feeding
- rapid advancement of enteral feeding

### **Bacterial involvement**

- Precise role unclear (intraluminal bacteria probably essential for the development of NEC)

**Table 2 – Indications for surgery in acute NEC**

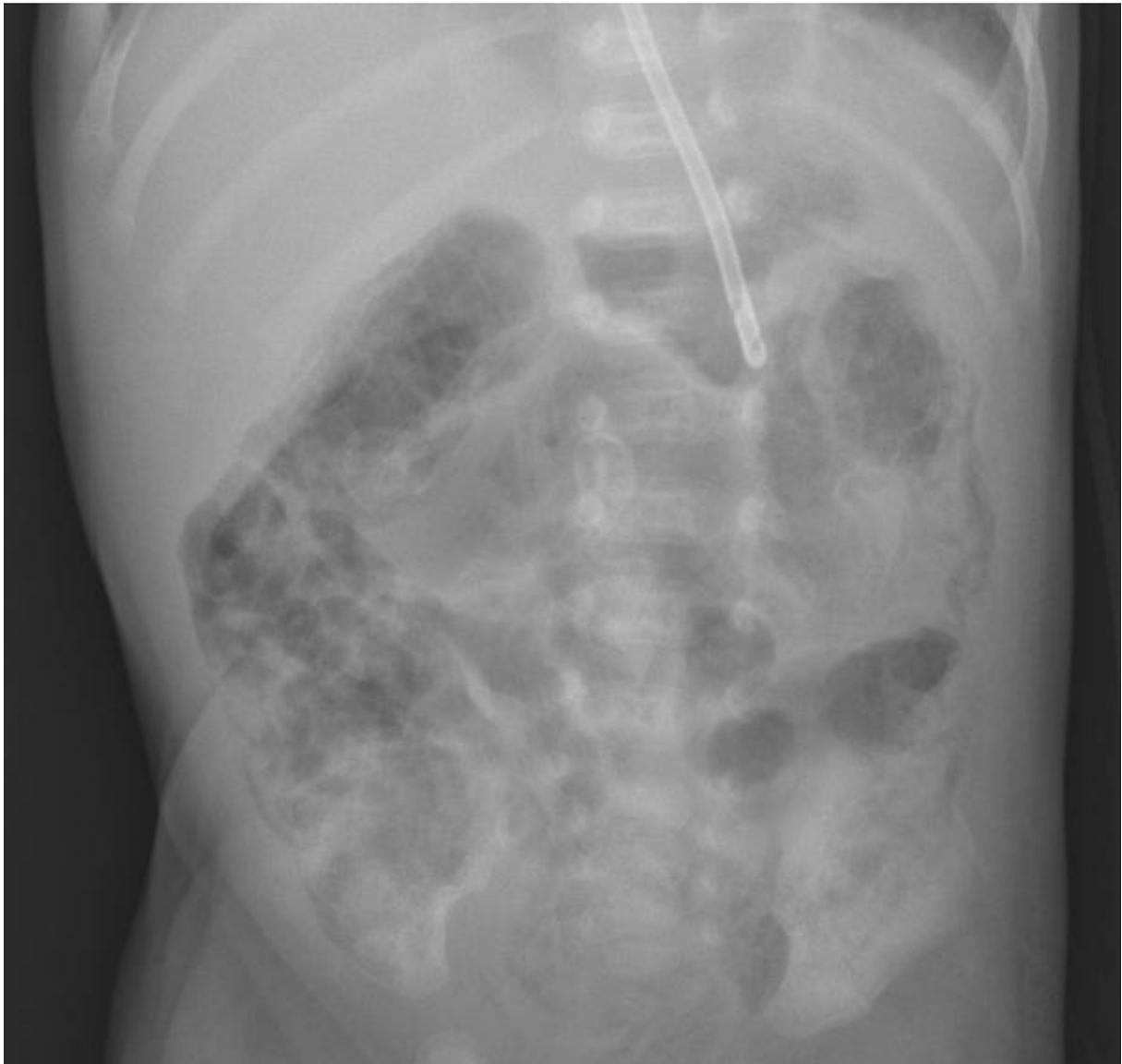
**Absolute indications**

- Pneumoperitoneum
- Clinical deterioration despite maximal medical treatment
- Abdominal mass with persistent intestinal obstruction

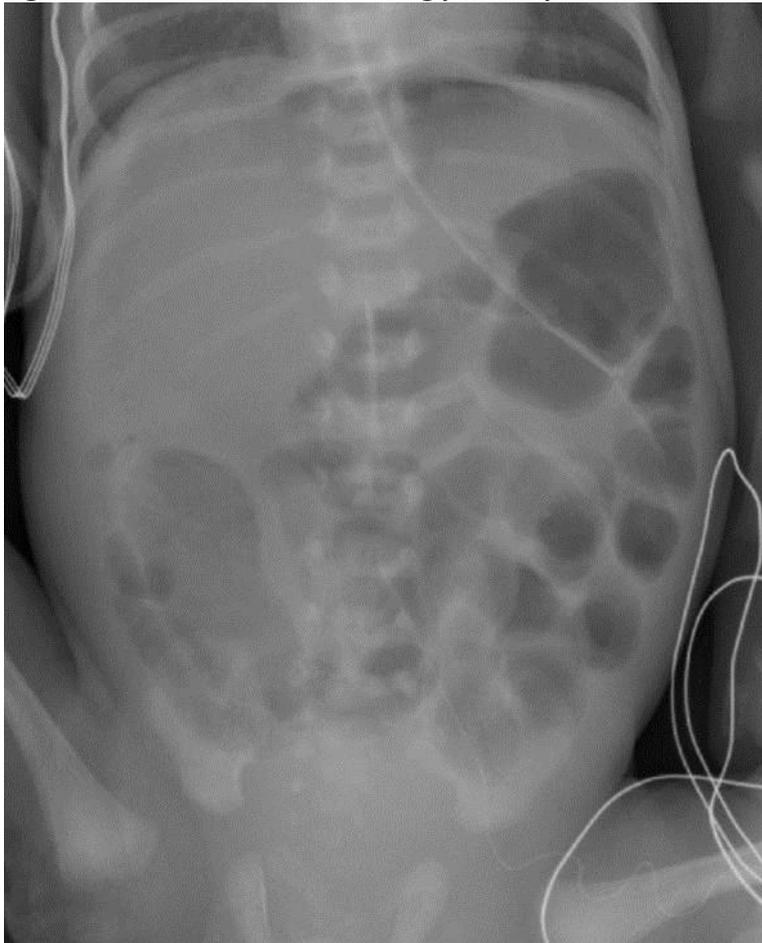
**Relative indications**

- Increased abdominal tenderness, distension and/or discolouration
- Portal vein gas

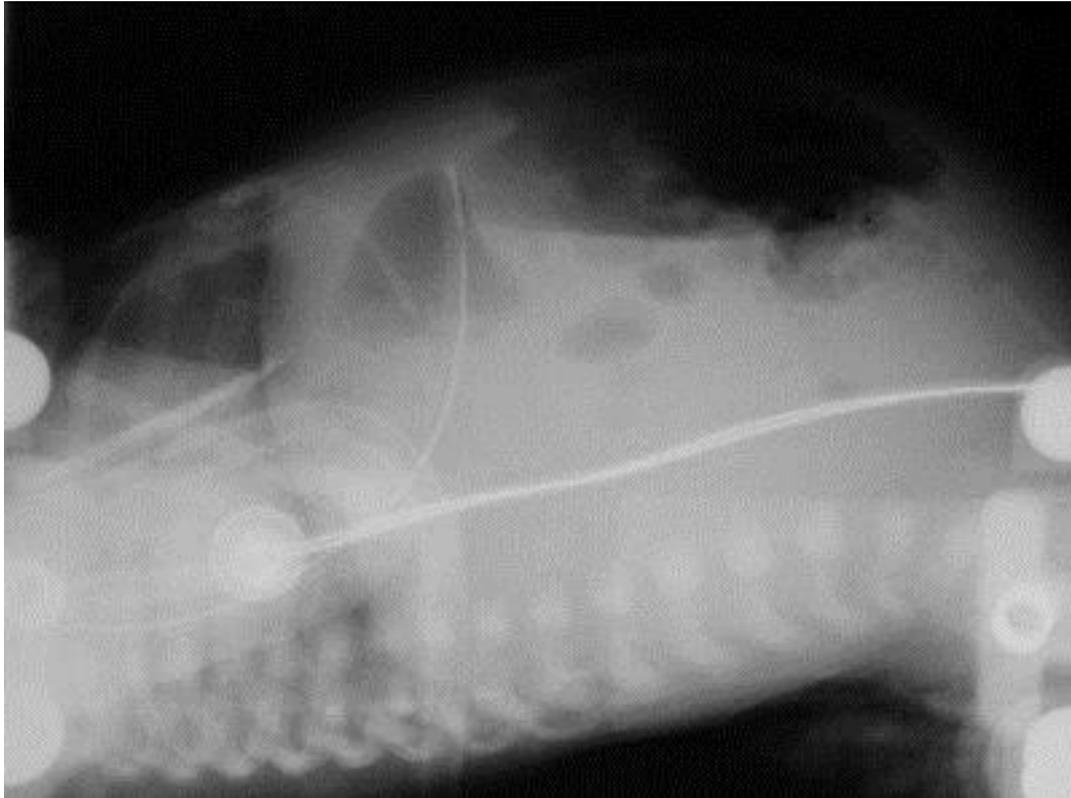
**Figure 1 – Plain AXR demonstrating pneumatosis intestinalis in an infant with suspected NEC**



**Figure 2 – Plain AXR demonstrating pneumoperitoneum in an infant with NEC**



**Figure 3 – Lateral shoot-through AXR in an infant with NEC demonstrating pneumoperitoneum**



**Figure 4 – Modified Bell staging criteria for NEC. Modified from [44].**

Stage	I	IIA	IIB	IIIA	IIIB
Description	Suspected NEC	Mild NEC	Moderate NEC	Severe NEC	Severe NEC
Systemic signs	Temperature instability, apnoea, bradycardia	Similar to stage I	Mild acidosis, thrombocytopenia	Respiratory and metabolic acidosis, mechanical ventilation, hypotension, oliguria, DIC	Further deterioration and shock
Intestinal signs	Increased gastric residuals, mild abdominal distension, occult blood in the stool	Marked abdominal distension ± tenderness, absent bowel sounds, grossly bloody stools	Abdominal wall oedema and tenderness ± palpable mass	Worsening wall oedema with erythema and induration	Evidence of perforation
Radiographic signs	Normal or mild ileus	Ileus, dilated bowel loops, focal pneumatosis	Extensive pneumatosis, early ascites ± PVG	Prominent ascites, fixed bowel loop, no free air	Pneumoperitoneum

DIC = disseminated intravascular coagulopathy; PVG = portal venous gas.

**Figure 5 Meta-analysis of primary peritoneal drainage vs. primary laparotomy for NEC. Outcome is mortality. Data from [59, 60].**

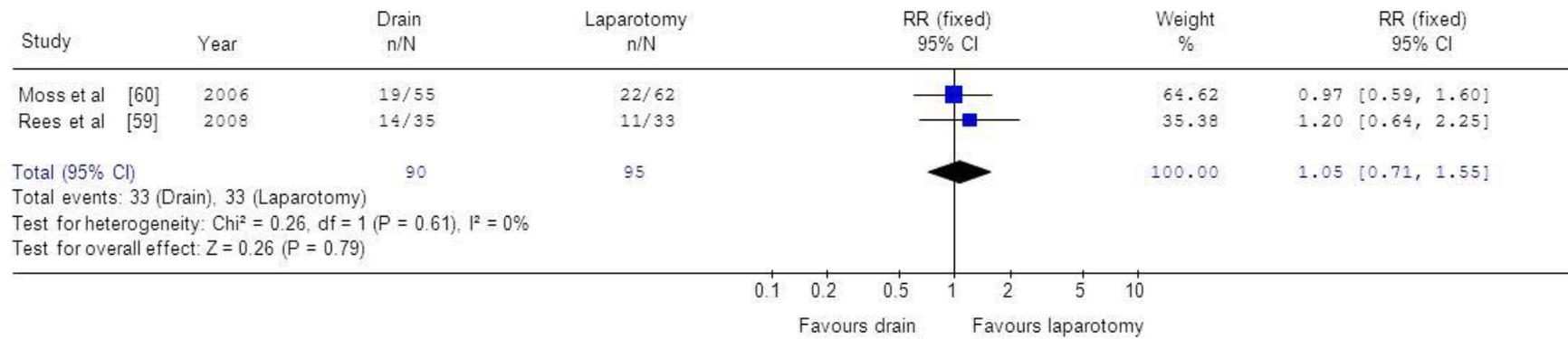


Figure 6 – Proposed surgical strategy for NEC (modified from Hall & Pierro [64])

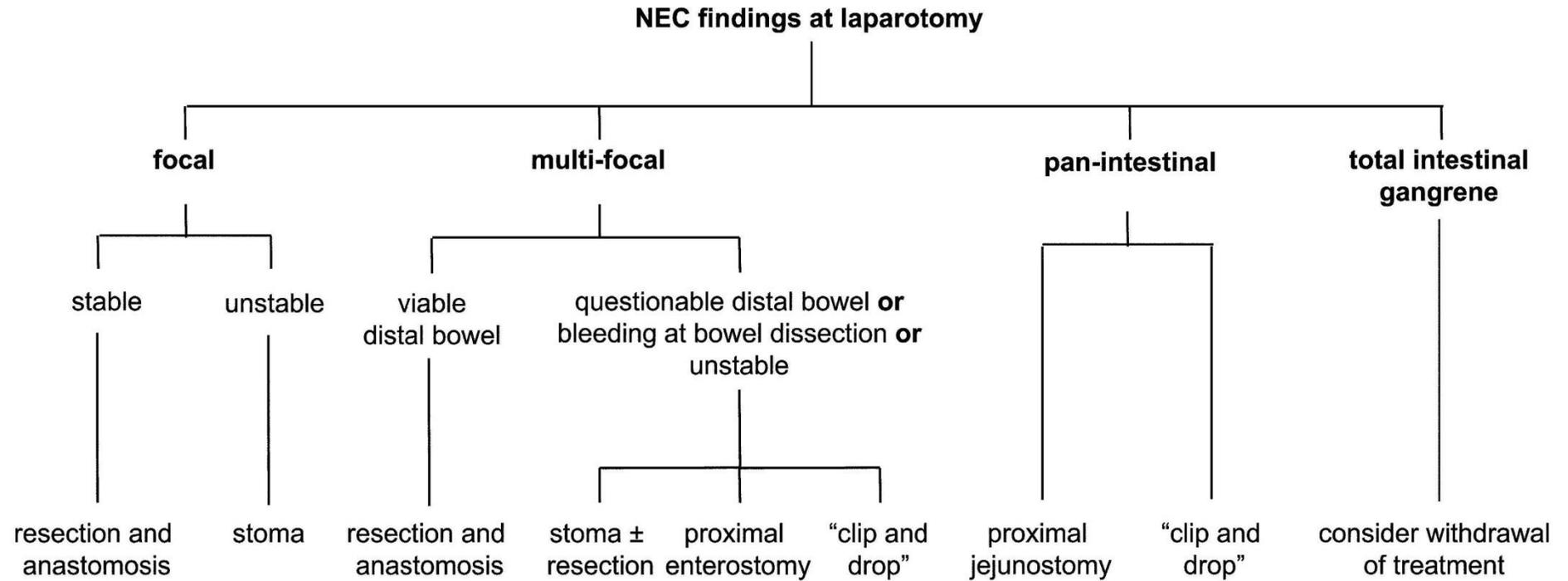
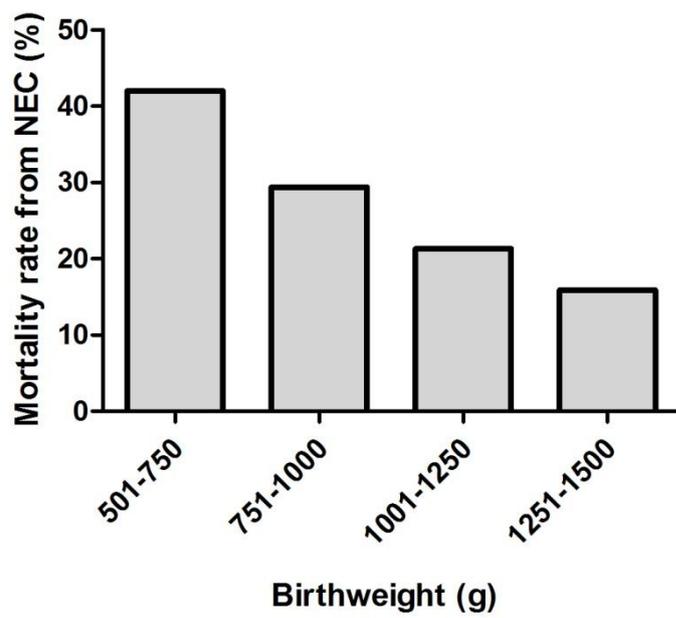


Figure 7 – Mortality of NEC by birthweight category (data from Fitzgibbons *et al.*[6])



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