

Home from home in Ronald McDonald Houses

In 1989 a global charity providing free 'home away from home' accommodation for the families of hospitalised children opened its first House in the UK. Today, Ronald McDonald House Charities has a network of 15 Houses and 25 sets of family rooms in the UK, located within or near to hospitals with specialist paediatric and neonatal wards.

The importance and impact of parental proximity on the wellbeing of hospitalised children has been recognised for many years. The increased level of stress experienced by parents of sick children has also been well documented, especially in the case of neonates.

Anne Roberts, Head of Operations and Development for Ronald McDonald House Charities, agrees: "From birth through to teenage years children need to have their family close to them when they are in hospital because it can be a frightening experience. For newborn babies it is extremely important to establish an early bond with parents.

"Sometimes to access the best medical treatment families need to travel long distances and this can be an immense source of stress, both emotional and financial. We recognise that by offering families a free, supportive and comfortable place to live for the duration of their child's hospital stay we are helping to alleviate some of that stress. Little things also make a big difference, such as every one of our



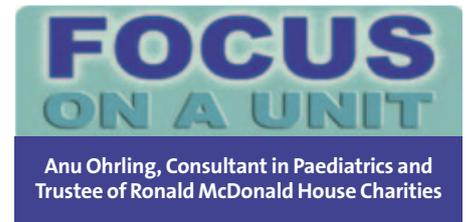
Natasha and Steve Paul with daughter Grace.

rooms having a direct telephone line to their child's ward. Parents go to bed knowing that they will be contacted immediately if their child runs into difficulties and that they are only minutes away."

To access a Ronald McDonald House a family is typically referred to the House Manager by either a member of the nursing staff, the ward clerk or receptionist. House Manager at Ronald McDonald House Tooting, in London, Jeanette Hill explains: "St George's is a large London hospital and there are a number of specialist paediatric wards and services. Throughout the week I visit the wards and talk with the sister or the team psychologist about families who might benefit from staying in one of our eight bedrooms. As a former nurse, I have a useful insight into how the medical teams

operate but also as a parent myself I understand it from the family's perspective.

"A fairly recent change on the neonatal ward was the introduction of two Family Care Co-ordinators (FCC). The FCC is a dedicated post to support neonatal parents and it seems to be working really well. The nursing and



medical teams are often extremely busy delivering the best care for baby, whereas the FCC is there to support the family emotionally."

With such clear demand for family accommodation, it is not surprising to find that most Ronald McDonald Houses attract long waiting lists. Looking to the future it seems that demand for 'home away from home' accommodation is likely to increase given the government's current proposal for focusing medical treatment at centres of excellence, which will mean the closure of some existing facilities and therefore greater distances to travel.

Commenting on the most recent government announcement around the provision of children's cardiac treatment in the UK, Anne Roberts says: "The recent move to close some children's heart surgery units can only mean an increase in demand for parental accommodation. We hope that independent charities like ours can continue to support the potential increase in the numbers of children and families who will need our help."

The thousands of families who have stayed in a Ronald McDonald House are the charity's biggest advocates. They also highlight the important role that the House Manager has in welcoming the families into the home and offering emotional and practical support.

The Paul family, who stayed at Ronald McDonald House Tooting are representative of how many parents feel after coming into contact with the charity. Steve Paul says: "Words can't express how we feel about Ronald McDonald House Charities but what I can say is that they helped us find strength in a time that was hellish. Before we found out about the charity we had planned to take out a loan to pay for a local hotel. Staying at the House gave us the opportunity to bond with Max for his short seven weeks of life. We will never forget the House Manager Jeanette and her team for the kindness and support they showed us in our time of need."

To find out more about Ronald McDonald House Charities visit www.rmhc.org.uk



Jeanette Hill, centre, with the paediatric nursing team from St George's Hospital in Tooting.