

NEWS

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****UTHSCD anesthesiologists work
to cut the fear out of surgery

DALLAS--Kids are frankly afraid of needles, and adults don't like them much better. So the anesthesiologists at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas took an innovative approach to pre-operative medication: cut out the shots and take some of the fear out of surgery.

Before a patient at Parkland Memorial Hospital goes to surgery, he gets an oral tranquilizer and a dose of milk of magnesia instead of injections. Each represents an unusual approach to pre-operative medication that has been quieting fears and saving money for several years at the hospitals served by UTHSCD anesthesiologists.

"Surveys have shown that a child's greatest fear at the hospital is fear of needles. An adult's first fear is an unknown fatal disease, but needles are his second concern," said Dr. A.H. Giesecke, chairman of the Department of Anesthesiology at Southwestern Medical School. "The major reason for pre-operative sedation is to bring the patient to the operating room in a relaxed, comfortable state to be prepared for surgery. There is no reason to increase the patient's anxiety by using hypodermics when they are not necessary."

To sedate a patient before surgery, the anesthetist gives an oral tranquilizer rather than a hypodermic injection to induce a state of twilight sleep or partial anesthesia. The tranquilizers administered are Valium-like drugs. For outpatient surgery, a short-acting tranquilizer, Halcion, is used. "All have a base of benzodiazepine and are ideal for relieving anxiety, providing mild sedation and suppressing unwanted side effects," according to Giesecke.

The second innovation helps to protect the patient against a common cause of post-operative pneumonia. The anesthesiologist orders a dose of milk of magnesia to neutralize digestive acids in the stomach. Although the patient should not have had a meal for eight hours before surgery and should have an empty stomach, it is still possible that he or she could regurgitate during surgery.

"Gastric acid from the stomach, inhaled into the lungs, burns their surface. This is a chemical burn, causing blisters and an accumulation of fluid, just like an acid burn to your skin," explained Giesecke. "Damage to the surface of the lungs keeps them from absorbing enough oxygen and makes the patient susceptible to pneumonia. The milk of magnesia guards against such a burn by neutralizing the stomach acid and making it less harmful."

The two simple-sounding innovations not only guard the patients' welfare but also save hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical expenses for the hospital population. "The ordinary intramuscular pre-operative medication involves three drugs. The patient is charged about \$45 for three shots. Our patients are charged \$2 for the tranquilizer and \$1 for the milk of magnesia," said Giesecke.

The savings to individuals and taxpayers is sizable, considering that the anesthesiologists following this program include approximately 35 UTHSCD faculty members and 60 anesthesiology residents who administer anesthesia for nearly 25,000 surgeries a year. They work at Parkland, the Veterans Administration Medical Center, Children's Medical Center and the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children.

"I want to emphasize that the patient's safety and comfort are our prime concerns. In cases involving emergencies or intense pain, an intramuscular sedative may be necessary, but for ordinary cases our plan is very successful," concluded Giesecke.

The two innovations, introduced to the Southwest through UTHSCD, have gained general acceptance on the East Coast but are not commonly used in the Dallas area.

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