Patients’ attitudes towards the involvement of medical students during induction of regional anesthesia

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Study objective: We surveyed patients undergoing day surgery to determine attitudes towards medical students’ during induction of regional anesthesia.

Design/Interventions: During a two-month period, an anonymous questionnaire was given to one hundred and eighty patients presenting for elective day surgery with planned regional anesthesia.

Setting: Pre-operative assessment area in a district general hospital.

Patients: All adult elective day surgery patients undergoing regional anesthesia.

Main results: One hundred sixteen patients (72%) would allow medical students to be present during the induction of regional anesthesia, and 104 (63%) would allow medical students to perform basic procedures.

Conclusions: This survey confirms that the majority of patients undergoing regional anesthesia would allow medical students to be present during the induction and to participate in supervised procedures. Concerns regarding patient anxiety could be alleviated by the introduction of the student pre-operatively; the problem of clinical errors made by students is the responsibility of the supervising doctor, and careful selection of practical procedures is crucial.

Keywords: patient survey, regional anesthesia, medical student

Introduction

Clinical teaching is a central part of medical student education. These patient encounters can promote clinical learning, improve communication skills and start to develop the basis for a future doctor–patient relationship. However conflict can arise between the educational requirements of medical students and the needs of the patients. Previous studies have shown that patients are generally tolerant of medical students in a variety of settings from the emergency department1 to outpatient clinics.2–7 However, no study has yet enquired about the acceptability of medical students during the induction of regional anesthesia. This can be an excellent forum for basic and clinical science education, but there are concerns regarding the acceptability of medical students to potentially anxious patients.4,5 We therefore surveyed pre-operative day case patients to determine attitudes towards medical students’ presence and involvement.

Materials and methods

The study took place in a small district general hospital, which serves as a placement for medical students attending the local medical school. We performed a survey of all adult patients presenting for day surgery under regional anesthesia during the period of October to November 2009. One hundred eighty patients were handed an anonymous
questionnaire (Appendix A) to complete whilst waiting in the pre-operative area.

Results
Of the 180 forms issued, 164 were completed (response rate of 91%). The mean age of the responders was 55.4 years (range 22–89 years), with 56% being male and 44% female. Table 1 outlines the regional anesthesia procedures performed for the survey participants. One hundred sixteen patients (71%) would allow medical students to be present during the induction of regional anesthesia, and 104 (63%) would allow medical students to perform simple tasks under supervision.

In total, 160 patients recognized the benefits for medical students being present in the theater environment. One hundred forty-nine patients (91%) identified potential educational merits, 94 (57%) acknowledged the opportunity to practise skills, and thirty-three patients (20%) stated that the theater environment provided an opportunity for medical students to talk to patients.

Only 22 patients (13%) stated any concerns about medical students being present. The two main points of concern focused on the fact that medical students may make a mistake and that the patients were too nervous; comments included “what if the student injected the wrong drug or amount of drug”, and “their presence would make me more nervous”.

Discussion
Patients who are to undergo an operation have many pre-operative fears, and a large portion of these focus on the anesthetic technique.8,9 There is a concern that the addition of medical students to this area may not be acceptable to patients. This survey has shown that 71% of patients would allow medical students to be present during the induction of regional anesthesia, and 104 (63%) would allow medical students to perform simple tasks under supervision.

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Only 22 patients (13%) stated any concerns about medical students being present. The two main points of concern focused on the fact that medical students may make a mistake and that the patients were too nervous; comments included “what if the student did something wrong before it was noticed”, “what if the student injected the wrong drug or amount of drug”, and “their presence would make me more nervous”.

The results of this survey confirm that most day case patients recognize the benefits for medical students being present during the induction of regional anesthesia and are accepting their presence. Concerns regarding patient anxiety and potential clinical errors must be addressed in the pre-operative period; this should include an introductory visit by the medical student in question and a discussion between the patient and the supervising doctor.
Ethical approval

Ethical approval was waived by Weston General Hospital Audit and Research Board. All survey forms were anonymous.

Disclosure

No conflicts of interest were declared in relation to this paper.

References

Appendix A

Dear Patient

This is a short questionnaire to find out your thoughts on having medical students (student doctors) in theater whilst you are having your operation.

This is completely confidential.

Age: ...........yrs  Sex:  Male [ ]   Female [ ]

1. What do you think are the advantages for medical students being present in theater?
   - Education [ ]
   - Practice [ ]
   - Familiarity with theater environment [ ]
   - Any others? [ ]

2. Would you be ok with medical students being present in the anesthetic room as you have your anesthetic?
   Yes [ ]  No [ ]

3. Would you be ok with medical students helping the anesthetic team with procedures (eg, putting a drip into the back of your hand)
   Yes [ ]  No [ ]

4. What are your main concerns with medical students being present? (eg, too crowded, too nervous, they may make a mistake, I don’t feel safe)

5. Are there any other issues regarding medical students being present in theater that you would like to raise?

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