

Awareness during Pediatric Anesthesia.

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Awareness during anesthesia has long been recognized as a potentially serious medical and medico-legal problem, a problem which, in recent years, seems to be reported more frequently. During 15 years and 250,000+ cases at the Hospital for Sick Children Toronto, between 1968 and 1984, I am only aware of two case of accidental intra-operative awareness. Yet a recent study suggests an incidence of 0.8 % in pediatric patients. Did we simply miss upwards of 2000 cases of awareness; possibly we did miss these cases, children who described true awareness were not very upset by this and seldom volunteered the information. Its occurrence was only established by very careful questioning postoperatively. If you do not dig for it you will not find it! Alternatively, has awareness become more common with the introduction of more recent anesthesia techniques, emphasis on fast-tracking, emphasis on cost cutting (Keep the concentrations of those expensive drugs down!), and a rather widespread recent emphasis on the undesirable and unpleasant side effects of nitrous oxide?

My interest in this topic was increased when I reviewed some of the recent case reports of pediatric awareness - and was not at all surprised that the patients had been aware – given the techniques with which they were anesthetized. Have some practitioners simply forgotten some of the real basics of pediatric anesthesia? Reviews of closed claims resulting from awareness cases in adults have concluded that there was a deviation from the standard of practice in a high percentage of those patients reviewed. Are we getting careless with anesthesia management?

To effectively prevent awareness it is first essential to understand the anesthetic requirements of infants and children of different ages. Then it is the responsibility of the anesthesia provider to ensure that these doses are delivered without interruption for the time that they are needed. Finally, one might decide to use one of the monitoring systems which is touted to help prevent awareness – recognizing that these may have their serious limitations.

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