for any deep sedation, however many hospital paediatricians have the skills required to administer such a drug providing they have experience with the drug and are familiar with its complications and contraindications.


Carbon monoxide poisoning in two children riding in the back of a van

EDITOR.- A brother and sister aged 9 and 10 years, respectively, were both previously fit and well and were noticed to be abnormally drowsy after a 40 minute journey in the back of a Transit type van. On arrival at the accident and emergency department, both children were drowsy but oriented in time and space. Both complained of headache and both had vomited. Neither had abnormal neurological signs on examination.

Arterial blood gases revealed carboxyhaemoglobin (COHb) concentrations of 24.5% and 19.7% respectively by absorption photometry (International Laboratories 482 Co Oximeter). Both children were treated with 100% inspired oxygen at 6 litres/minute via a well fitting face mask. Symptomatic improvement was apparent at one hour and both were fully alert with normal intellectual function at two hours. Repeat blood gases six hours after admission showed COHb concentrations of less than 1% (normal range in urban non-smokers <2%). Three months after the poisoning, both children were reassessed. At this stage, there were no detectable intellectual or behavioural abnormalities noted by either parents or teachers. No neurological deficits were present.

Admission levels of COHb correlate poorly with short or long term sequelae. However, the levels measured in these children have been associated with long term neuropsychiatric morbidity in some patients. Treatment with hyperbaric oxygen is recommended if COHb concentrations exceed 40% or if there is a history of loss of consciousness, persisting neurological or ictal leucocytic deficits, or cardiovascular abnormalities. None of these features were present in these two cases and both made a complete recovery. However, had the journey been of longer duration or the symptoms not recognised, a serious or fatal poisoning may have occurred. The dangers of riding in the back of "pick-up" trucks has recently been highlighted. In a series of 68 consecutive carbon monoxide poisonings, 20 occurred in children travelling in the back of pick-up type trucks, beneath canopies or soft covers, with defective or modified exhaust systems. In this case, the children were travelling in the back of a fully enclosed van. Subsequent inspection by the owner revealed a small crack in the exhaust system.

Carbon monoxide poisoning is a common cause of fatal poisoning. Clinicians must maintain a high degree of suspicion to recognise cases who frequently present with non-specific signs. Travelling in a vehicle with a damaged or non-standard exhaust system is a significant risk factor and travelling in the back of vans may be an additional risk for carbon monoxide poisoning.

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Quality of life in surgically palliated complex congenital heart disease

EDITOR.—Casey et al’s review of patients after surgical palliation of complex congenital heart disease identifies the need to assess health status in children with chronic ill health. The ability to measure ‘health related quality of life’ (HRQL) in those with morbidity secondary to their disease, and any interventions performed by their clinicians, is increasingly being recognised as an essential facet of total patient care.

A comprehensive identification of the core set of attributes which combine to provide an index of HRQL revealed the following key set of six: sensory and communication ability, happiness, self care, pain or discomfort, learning and school ability, and physical activity. The Feeny-Barr multiattribte health assessment uses these domains to provide a utility score of HRQL and is a simple, concise instrument which may well be an appropriate tool to measure the overall morbidity burden in patients with chronic conditions such as cardiac patients. This instrument’s practicability and validity is currently being evaluated in Nottingham and Canada.