

The Knowledge of Anaesthetics among lay people

Anaesthetics is a skilled and specialised area of medicine in which a high proportion of people are exposed to at some point in their lives. The aim of the project was to assess what knowledge the general population have about anaesthesia. The study was completed in a rural primary care environment. A patient questionnaire was developed and distributed to 83 patients attending the surgery over a two day period. 73 patients completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire design was based on *Anaesthesia Explained*, a patient information booklet published jointly by the *Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland* and the *Royal College of Anaesthetists* [1]. The questionnaire focused on the qualifications and professional responsibilities of the anaesthetists, and the side effects of anaesthesia. All patients over the age of 18 were invited to complete a questionnaire upon arrival at the surgery. Patients that lacked capacity and those needing immediate medical attention were excluded from the study.

Results

Of the 73 participants, 93.2% (n68) knew that anaesthetists were medically qualified, however only 43.8% (n32) believed that the anaesthetist is a Doctor, with 41%(n30) mistaking the anaesthetist for an Operating Department Practitioner (Graph Two). The minimum training period of an anaesthetist from leaving medical school to attaining a Certificate of Completion of Training (CCT) was identified most popularly as 3 years (20.5%, n15), 4 years (20.5%, n15) and 5 years (34.2%, n25) respectively. 6.8% of participants thought it took less than 2 years to attain a CCT post medical school (Graph One).

Questions orientated around the role of the anaesthetist were included. 87.7% (n64) of participants identified that the anaesthetist is responsible for giving the anaesthetic however other roles were less well understood. Significantly just 13.7% (n10) knew that anaesthetists are responsible for administering blood transfusions intra-operatively and 20.5% (n15) identified that providing analgesia is a key role of the anaesthetist (Graph three).

Discussion

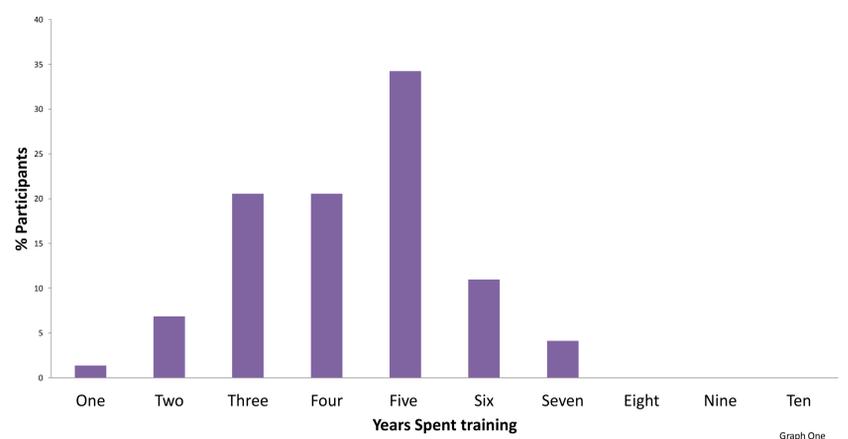
The level of knowledge around anaesthetics in the general population is alarmingly low. Of particular concern is the understanding of what the anaesthetist does. The correlation between being medically qualified and having the title of doctor was not well known. This may have little practical importance, however demonstrates the naivety of the general population to the speciality as a whole.

The study does bring up some valuable practical points. Patients are poorly informed about the role of anaesthetists and it is of concern that just 13.7% of participants were aware that intra-operative blood transfusions are managed by anaesthetists. Patients may have a great deal of anxiety about potential blood transfusions and if they do not know who to consult about their concerns this may heighten their unease. Just 20.5% of subjects knew that the anaesthetist is responsible for intra-operative analgesia. Side effects of anaesthesia are also poorly understood. Even common side effects such as operative site pain (29.2% n14) and confusion (24.7%, n18) are not well known.

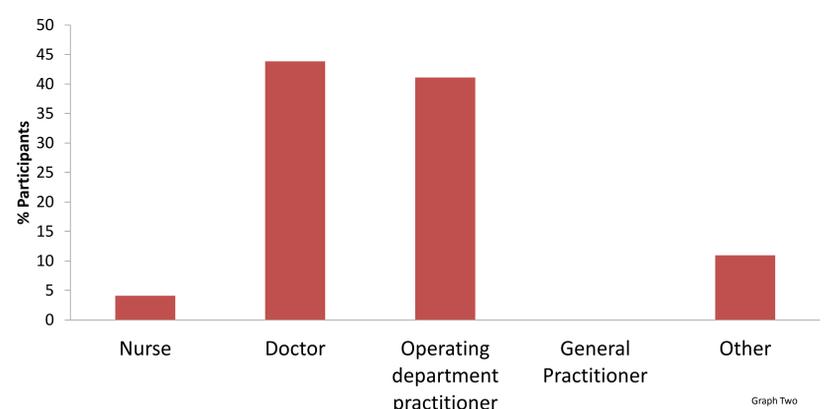
If patients are aware that the anaesthetist has a wider role than just providing an anaesthetic they will be empowered to discuss the different options available and make a fully informed choice. This will help shift the dynamic of the doctor-patient relationship away from paternalistic care, something which is actively encouraged in modern medical education.

It is likely that the gaps in patient knowledge will be filled by the anaesthetist pre-operatively, although it can often be difficult to cover all necessary aspects verbally and the level of understanding patients have can easily be overestimated. Literature such as the *Anaesthesia Explained* booklet should be utilised in patient areas to

Years spent training post university identified



Anaesthetists professional group identified



Side effects of anaesthesia identified