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CONNECTING PATIENTS & PROVIDERS

Ready... Set... Zzzzzz. Wake Up to Anesthesia! by Panchali Dhar, MD

Each year in the United States, some 70 million people undergo medical procedures ranging from a colonoscopy, to a facelift, to heart surgery. No matter what the procedure, everyone wants the same thing: to emerge safe and sound.

Patient satisfaction is typically declared via statements such as, “In spite of all my health problems, the procedure went without a glitch; my surgeon is a miracle worker!” It is true that the role of the surgeon was crucial, but another dimension was at work: A second important physician was in the room—the anesthesiologist.

Most patients don’t consider the role of anesthesia. The general public refers to the anesthesiologist as simply “the person who puts you to sleep.” The key concept missed here is the word physician. An anesthesiologist is a medical doctor who, after additional years of training and experience, has chosen to care for patients undergoing surgery. This physician knows how to incorporate knowledge of medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and obstetrics with an expertise in pain control.

Unfortunately, public attention to anesthesia is usually aroused only after a mishap occurs. This attention is especially acute when a high-profile patient is involved. The surgery can go perfectly well, but an anesthetic mishap—such as a patient’s allergy to a particular medication—can turn everything sour. The opposite is also true. The anesthesia can be delivered perfectly, but a surgical complication (such as unexpected heavy bleeding) can lead a patient down a different path.

Public opinion about anesthesia usually stems from popular misconceptions.

Myth #1: All anesthetics are the same

Answer: False

Choice is the emphasis here. Anesthesia is a broad term used to include all the techniques and medications used to eliminate pain, anxiety, sensation, movement, and awareness. The term broadly includes local anesthesia, sedation, general anesthesia, and regional anesthesia.

Myth #2: The anesthesiologist has very little to do during surgery

Answer: False

Anesthesiologists are like pilots; they steer a patient’s body functions through ups and downs. It is a job that requires steady nerves, since no patient’s vital functions stay rock-stable during an operation. So what do people need to know about anesthesia? Many things. The specialty often gets minimal attention. I found there is no consumer-oriented book to answer the questions patients ask about anesthesia right before a procedure. Some people are simply curious, while others want to be empowered in their health-care decision-making. I decided to write a definitive go-to source for preparation before a medical procedure. I want this book to help patients and their families ask the right questions. The book discusses popular topics such as awareness and pain control. It’s entitled *Before the Scalpel: What Everyone Should Know about Anesthesia* (Tell Me Press, January 2009). I believe it opens a new perspective for those who never thought about the other side of the curtain.

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