A Position Statement on the Perianesthesia Patient with a Do-Not-Resuscitate Advance Directive

Synopsis

The American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses (ASPN) has a responsibility to define principles of safe, quality nursing practice in the perianesthesia setting. ASPAN, therefore, has the responsibility to assist in defining and supporting guidelines for the provision of ethically sound care during the perianesthesia period. Ethical care during the perianesthesia period requires that the nurse act in accordance with ethical principles and with knowledge of a patient’s predetermined end-of-life wishes. The perianesthesia registered nurse’s ethical responsibilities encourage advocacy to assure a preanesthesia patient’s consent is truly informed, autonomous and self-determined. The nurse also demonstrates respect by facilitating holistic concern for the perianesthesia patient’s emotional, spiritual and educational well being while providing physical safety.

A patient (and/or the assigned proxy) whose advance directive specifies no life sustaining measures may be unaware that cardiac or respiratory arrest are always potential yet usually reversible outcomes associated with anesthesia. When the patient’s desires for the perianesthesia period are not specifically identified, anesthetic-related changes in physiologic function present the perianesthesia registered nurse with ethical conflict and confusion about appropriate interventions.

Background

1. A number of surgical patients have active Do-Not-Resuscitate (DNR), Do-Not-Attempt Resuscitation (DNAR), Do-Not-Intubate (DNI) or Allow Natural Death (AND) requests reflecting the elderly or chronically ill patient’s preference for a “dignified death” without artificial life support.

2. Palliative treatment or comfort care or emergency events might require anesthesia and surgery. These interventions stress physiologic function, suppress consciousness and precipitate transient, reversible decreases in cardiac and respiratory function, but are not associated with natural evolutions toward the patient’s death.

3. Endotracheal intubation, mechanical ventilation, cardiovascular medications, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and defibrillation/cardioversion are often specifically restricted in an advance directive. Many procedures requiring anesthesia require the use of intubation techniques and mechanical ventilation to protect the airway for the...
duration of the anesthesia. The patient, family and/or legal representative may not be aware that some of these interventions are routinely used to support vital organ functioning during the perianesthesia period.

4. Assuming the patient’s wishes or applying an institutional policy or medical decision that automatically suspends any patient’s DNR, DNAR, DNI or AND directive during the perioperative period denies the patient’s right to self-determination and to autonomous, informed choices. The perianesthesia registered nurse is intimately involved in determining patient readiness for procedures and often is the “first-responder” who witnesses, then collaborates with physicians and anesthesia professionals to intervene and evaluate the outcomes of respiratory and/or cardiac arrest. Unclear communications and ambiguous or nonexistent institutional policies about a patient’s DNR, DNAR, DNI or AND status during the perianesthesia period do not direct and support a nurse’s decisions and actions. Ethically, this nurse must choose between not responding, thereby doing harm (maleficence) and a professional and legal obligation to preserve life without harm (beneficence). These choices may conflict with the patient’s stated end-of-life choices.

**Position**

The American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses (ASPAN) recommends the following:

1. At the time of surgery and prior to receiving any anesthetic medication, a patient with an active DNR, DNAR, DNI or AND advance directive and/or assigned proxy will be asked to re-clarify wishes about resuscitation during the perianesthesia period.
   - This discussion will include clarification of the intrinsic nature of anesthesia and resultant measures to protect cardiovascular and respiratory functions during the administration of anesthesia.

2. To limit potential for ethical dilemmas, the patient’s informed consent will include a thorough review of the advance directive, living will or physician order that specifies DNR, DNAR, DNI or AND during a candid conversation with physicians and appropriate significant other(s).
   - Careful documentation of the discussion must be completed.

3. Each institution should establish and communicate a policy identifying resources and procedures detailing the management of a patient’s DNR, DNAR, DNI or AND status during the perianesthesia period.

   Each institution should establish and communicate policies that protect patient dignity, rights, autonomy and do not automatically suspend the DNR status without a detailed and
documented discussion of the risks, benefits and alternatives to the procedure as well as the desire of the patient to allow the DNR to be suspended or not.

4. Where the perianesthesia registered nurse’s personal convictions prohibit participation, that nurse may remove himself or herself from a patient care situation, as long as such removal does not harm the patient or constitute a breach of duty. The professional nurse should provide his or her manager with information about the specific situations that would be difficult to participate in so that the manager is better able to plan for patient needs. However, if an unplanned situation arises in which no other registered nurse is available to care for the patient, then the objecting nurse must ensure that the care needs of the patient are met.¹ (Refer to Perianesthesia Standards for Ethical Practice.)

Approval of Statement
This statement was approved by a vote of the ASPAN Board of Directors on April 20, 1996 in Phoenix, Arizona. ASPAN joins other professional colleagues, specifically the American Nurses Association (ANA), the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) and the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) in considering the ethical implications of the advance directive.

This position statement was updated and revised at the October 2015 meeting of the Standards and Guidelines Strategic Work Team in Fort Worth, Texas.

ASPN expresses appreciation to the following organizations for signing on in support of this position statement:
- American Association of Nurse Anesthetists
- Association of periOperative Registered Nurses

REFERENCE


BIBLIOGRAPHY


