Influence of anaesthetic and analgesic techniques on outcome after surgery

F. Bonnet* and E. Marret

Service d’Anesthésie-Réanimation, Hôpital Tenon, Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Paris, 4 rue de la Chine, F-75970 Paris cedex 20, France

*Corresponding author. E-mail: francis.bonnet@tnn.ap-hop-paris.fr

Postoperative symptoms and complications can be prevented by a suitable choice of anaesthetic and analgesic technique for specific procedures. The aim of analgesic protocols is not only to reduce pain intensity but also to decrease the incidence of side-effects from analgesic agents and to improve patient comfort. Moreover, adequate pain control is a prerequisite for the use of rehabilitation programmes to accelerate recovery from surgery. Thus, combining opioid and/or non-opioid analgesics with regional analgesic techniques not only improves analgesic efficacy but also reduces opioid demand and side-effects such as nausea and vomiting, sedation, and prolongation of postoperative ileus. Although all attempts to demonstrate that regional anaesthesia and analgesia decrease postoperative mortality are unsuccessful, there is evidence supporting a reduction in pulmonary complications after major abdominal surgery, and an improvement in patient rehabilitation after orthopaedic surgery. When such techniques are used, cost–benefit analysis should be considered to determine suitable analgesic protocols for specific surgical procedures.

Br J Anaesth 2005; 95: 52–8

Keywords: anaesthetic techniques, epidural; analgesic techniques, regional; analgesics non-opioid; surgery, postoperative period

Surgery induces important disturbances in body homeostasis such as hypercatabolism, hypercoagulability, and inflammation, leading to a series of symptoms and signs such as hypoxaemia, pain, nausea, vomiting, ileus, sleep disturbances, and fatigue, and complications including pneumonia and myocardial infarction. Each symptom or complication that contributes to postoperative morbidity is likely to prolong the duration of hospital stay. Anaesthetic and analgesic techniques not only aim to provide suitable conditions for surgery, but also to prevent postoperative complications and to decrease postoperative morbidity and mortality.

Assessment of the impact of anaesthetic and analgesic techniques on postoperative outcome commonly focuses on the incidence of mortality and major complications after major surgical procedures. Nevertheless, other postoperative adverse events such as pain, nausea, vomiting, and urinary retention may also impair patient comfort, recovery, and rehabilitation after minor and major surgical procedures. In addition, there is growing evidence that acute postoperative events may have long-term consequences. For example, uncontrolled postoperative pain is related to the development of chronic pain syndromes; postoperative myocardial ischaemia and infarction are risk factors for death from cardiac causes in the following months; and postoperative increases in plasma creatinine concentration could be indicative of the development of chronic renal failure.

As postoperative pain is often the predominant symptom, it can be considered an important outcome of surgery. Patients may relate improved pain control to improved postoperative outcome. Several analgesic agents and techniques, including regional analgesia and i.v. patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) using opioids, have been demonstrated to effectively control postoperative pain. Two issues need to be addressed. Is it possible to optimize pain control, improving the effectiveness of analgesic agents and reducing the incidence of their side-effects; and are we able to reduce postoperative morbidity and hasten recovery through the treatment of postoperative pain?

Improving the effectiveness of analgesic agents

Patient-controlled administration of i.v. opioids, and peripheral and central nerve blocks using local anaesthetic agents, are the corner stones of analgesic strategies, the latter being considered more effective than the former. Nevertheless, each technique has its own limitations and none can achieve complete postoperative pain control.
In 2003, a meta-analysis that reviewed 1404 abstracts published over 36 yr, and included 100 studies, provided conclusions supporting the common belief shared by many anaesthetists, that epidural analgesia provides better postoperative pain control than systemic analgesia. Although epidural analgesia is considered the most effective technique in terms of pain control, its efficacy is improved by the addition of systemic analgesics such as opioids or cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) inhibitors. 

Combining analgesic agents and techniques has been suggested to improve the efficacy of postoperative pain management. Non-opioid analgesic agents are thus combined with opioid PCA. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), COX-2 inhibitors, paracetamol, and nefopam have been demonstrated to reduce opioid demand, when combined with i.v. morphine PCA, COX-2 inhibitors are equally potent relative to non-selective NSAIDs, but paracetamol is possibly weaker. Adding a non-opioid agent to i.v. morphine PCA more commonly results in a decrease in morphine requirement than in a reduction in pain intensity at rest. Pain on mobilization can be more consistently reduced by multimodal analgesia than opioid administration. This is indicative of the fact that pain at rest is often easily controlled by a single analgesic agent but pain on mobilization, as a result of its greater intensity, requires several analgesic treatments. Other studies have documented the morphine-sparing effect of ketamine, and more recently gabapentin. Those agents may act differently, preventing acute sensitization to pain following surgery and acute tolerance to opioid. Finally, analgesic techniques such as infiltration of the incision with local anaesthetic solution, are associated with a morphine-sparing effect that is, however, limited to a few hours.

The concept of multimodal analgesia also applies to the combination of epidural local anaesthetic and opioid. Addition of opioid to epidural local anaesthetics relieves pain more effectively than local anaesthetics alone. Nevertheless, lowering pain intensity could be outweighed by an increase in the incidence of opioid-related side-effects that could be partly responsible for a prolongation in the duration of hospital stay. Prevention of opioid-related side-effects has consequently become a critical issue that may have economic consequences.

Can we reduce the incidence of side-effects from analgesic therapies?

Although pain intensity can be decreased by combining systemic analgesics, the major benefit of multimodal analgesia may be a decrease in the incidence of opioid side-effects rather than an increase in the effectiveness of pain control.

Respiratory depression is not the only side-effect related to opioid administration. In daily practice, patients more frequently complain of such problems as nausea, vomiting, urinary retention, pruritus, and prolongation of postoperative ileus. A series of randomized studies has concluded that opioid administration, and especially i.v. morphine PCA, is responsible for a significant delay in recovery of bowel function in patients who have undergone abdominal surgery. This may prolong the time to first oral intake, and in some instances the duration of hospital stay. This issue can be addressed in two ways: first, by reducing the amount of opioid administered through the concomitant administration of other analgesics; and second, by using opioid antagonists or other agents that prevent or treat opioid-related side-effects. The first approach has been documented to be successful when using NSAIDs or COX-2 inhibitors, because of their significant opioid-sparing effect, may reduce the incidence of nausea and vomiting caused by morphine. Conversely, Aubrun and colleagues noted that postoperative patients receiving paracetamol and morphine experienced nausea and vomiting, pruritus, and urinary retention as frequently as patients who received morphine alone, suggesting that paracetamol has a weaker opioid-sparing effect. Such results have two implications. First, the preventive effect of a non-opioid analgesic agent on nausea and vomiting is only beneficial if it also has an opioid-sparing effect. Secondly, opioids and especially morphine that have been considered the gold standard for postoperative pain treatment, could now, in view of their efficacy/safety profile, be better used as rescue medication. This is especially relevant for ambulatory anaesthesia as opioid-induced side-effects could be responsible for re-hospitalization of these patients.

The second approach that aims to decrease opioid-related side-effects consists of combining morphine with drugs that prevent its side-effects or with μ receptor antagonists. Droperidol, dexamethasone, and ondansetron each reduce the risk of postoperative nausea and vomiting by 25%, and total i.v. anaesthesia with propofol or the use of nitrogen instead of nitrous oxide is also effective. Interestingly, antiemetic agents act independently; they should be used with analgesics in patients having an increased risk of nausea and vomiting. More specifically, a quantitative review estimates that combining a small dose of droperidol with i.v. morphine PCA could avoid nausea and vomiting in three out of 10 patients.

Opioid antagonists

The use of opioid antagonists has been developed to prevent the prolongation of postoperative ileus induced by opioid administration. Methylnatrexone and alvimopan are recently developed opioid antagonists with activity that is restricted to peripheral gut receptors. Both drugs have the ability to reverse opioid-induced ileus without reversing analgesia. Alvimopan can be administered orally to act on μ receptors in the gastric wall. It is not absorbed through the gastric mucosa. The analgesic effect of i.v. morphine PCA is unaltered by the oral administration of alvimopan, but a 24 h
reduction in the time to recovery of bowel motility has been documented. Methylnaltrexone, a quaternary derivate of naltrexone, does not cross the blood–brain barrier and acts as a selective peripheral opioid receptor antagonist. It should be able to prevent not only bowel dysfunction but also, at least partly, other side-effects such as urinary retention.

A decrease in the duration of postoperative ileus of more than 24 h is an advantage of epidural analgesia using local anaesthetic agents only over opioid administration. In addition, the common belief that too rapid a recovery in bowel motility may promote the occurrence of anastomotic leakage has not been proven.

Can we reduce postoperative morbidity and mortality?

For many years, anaesthetists committed to postoperative care management have attempted to improve postoperative morbidity through better pain control. To assess the impact of anaesthetic and analgesic techniques, mortality is a well-defined and important outcome but it is also a very rare event. Large multicentre trials or meta-analyses are necessary to determine the impact of an anaesthetic technique on postoperative mortality. To include in such trials a significant number of patients or studies that fulfil the necessary criteria requires the participation of many different centres. The broad range of practice that results from the inclusion of large series of patients may introduce bias and heterogeneity and make it difficult to control all the factors likely to influence outcome. This explains the contradictory results that have been reported on this topic. Consequently, although a considerable amount of evidence has been published on the effect of anaesthetic techniques and postoperative analgesia on postoperative morbidity, the conclusions remain controversial. Regional anaesthetic techniques used per- and postoperatively have been claimed to improve patient recovery not only through pain control but also by preventing the neuroendocrine response to surgery. In 2000, a meta-analysis of studies published over 20 yr that had adequate methodology, provided impressive results concerning the effect of central blocks on postoperative morbidity and mortality. Regional analgesia not only prevented respiratory complications but also decreased the incidence of cardiac complications such as myocardial infarction, deep vein thrombosis, and pulmonary embolism. It was not only effective when considering globally all the different surgical procedures but also when looking at specific procedures such as orthopaedic, abdominal, and vascular surgery. Among the criticisms that followed the publication of this key study, it was claimed that the management of postoperative patients had changed over the last 20 yr, making some alleged benefits of regional analgesia less impressive. For instance, thromboprophylaxis is now more commonly used after hip and knee surgery, and low molecular weight heparins have considerably decreased the incidence of deep vein thrombosis, masking the benefits of epidural analgesia that were described in the early 1980s. Moreover, this practice is not without concern with respect to the risk of epidural haematoma in patients receiving spinal/epidural anaesthesia and thromboprophylaxis. In addition, laboratory tests or radiological investigations used to diagnose certain complications have changed, making the results of some studies unreliable. For example, a CT scan is more accurate in identifying pulmonary atelectasis than a chest X-ray. As another example, for a few years now the diagnosis of postoperative myocardial damage has relied on a very specific and sensitive increase in the plasma concentration of troponin Ic. Moreover, the increase in troponin Ic is predictive of mortality related to cardiac complications 6 months after surgery. Studies performed some years ago, that did not use measurements of troponin Ic, may have missed a significant number of adverse cardiac events in postoperative patients.

Other authors have collected evidence supporting the use of central blocks of local anaesthetic to decrease the incidence of postoperative pulmonary complications compared with the use of systemic opioids. The incidence of postoperative myocardial infarction has been shown to be lower by the use of thoracic epidural anaesthesia and analgesia.

Mortality, morbidity, and surgical procedures

The causes of morbidity and mortality vary according to the surgical procedure. Postoperative myocardial infarction is the most frequent of the serious complications that occur after vascular surgery, while pulmonary embolism is a leading cause of death after total hip or knee replacement. Pneumonia is especially common after upper abdominal surgery. Accordingly, it is appropriate to look at postoperative complications and the potential benefit of anaesthetic and analgesic techniques with respect to specific surgical procedures. Unfortunately, the results of recent large prospective double-blind, randomized, multicentre studies addressing the impact of analgesic techniques on postoperative morbidity and mortality in this way are disappointing.

Orthopaedic surgery. A meta-analysis of 15 randomized studies of hip fracture repair, documented that regional anaesthesia could decrease the relative risk of postoperative mortality (0.66; 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.47–0.96), and the relative risk of deep vein thrombosis (0.41; 95% CI 0.23–0.72), but had no significant impact on other postoperative complications or on the 1-yr mortality rate. This was confirmed by a meta-analysis of 17 trials including 2305 patients that noted a borderline statistical difference for 1-month mortality (6.8 vs 9.4%, relative risk 0.72, 95% CI 0.51–1), which disappeared at 3 months. Moreover, the authors highlighted that all the studies had methodological flaws, making uncertain the conclusions drawn. O’Hara and colleagues have evaluated a retrospective cohort of 9598
patients who underwent surgical repair of hip fracture in 20 US hospitals under either general (6206 patients) or regional (3219 patients) anaesthesia. Older patients and those who were more severely ill were more prone to receive regional (mainly spinal) anaesthesia. However, the adjusted relative risk for postoperative mortality, pneumonia, myocardial infarction, congestive heart failure, and changes in mental status were not demonstrative of a benefit from regional anaesthesia compared with general anaesthesia.

*Abdominal aortic surgery.* Controversy exists about the impact of epidural anaesthesia and analgesia on postoperative morbidity and mortality after abdominal aortic surgery. To explain the discrepancy between the different studies, it has been claimed that certain studies consider only the effect of intraoperative epidural anaesthesia, and that others focus only on postoperative epidural analgesia, despite the importance of both parts of the perioperative period. Trying to provide a definite answer, Norris and colleagues have designed a prospective, double-masked randomized trial comparing the effects of various combinations of intraoperative anaesthesia and postoperative analgesia on abdominal aortic surgery. They looked at death during hospital stay, cardiac death, and mortality at 12 months, but failed to find any difference in patients having either: general anaesthesia and i.v. PCA postoperatively; a combination of epidural anaesthesia peroperatively with general anaesthesia; general anaesthesia and postoperative epidural analgesia; or a combination of general and epidural anaesthesia and postoperative epidural analgesia. Conversely, Park and colleagues documented that patients who underwent abdominal aortic surgery were the only patients undergoing major abdominal surgery to benefit from an analgesic regimen combining epidural/general anaesthesia and postoperative epidural morphine. The difference from patients operated upon under general anaesthesia who received PCA i.v. morphine postoperatively, was related to the incidence of new myocardial infarction, stroke and respiratory failure. Patients in the epidural group were extubated earlier and spent less time in the intensive care unit. In contrast, in a subgroup of patients undergoing abdominal aortic surgery and suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, selected from a broader series of patients undergoing abdominal surgery, epidural analgesia was no more effective in preventing pulmonary complications than it was in the whole population, even in patients without specific risk factors.

*Abdominal surgery.* The effect of epidural anaesthesia and analgesia on outcome after major abdominal surgery was assessed in a large prospective multicentre trial that included 915 patients considered at risk of postoperative complications (patients suffering from chronic renal, hepatic, respiratory or cardiac failure, diabetes mellitus, obesity, previous myocardial infarction, or patients over 75 yr). The analysis was based on an intention to treat, meaning that the 29 patients with technical failure in the epidural group, the seven with immediate postoperative catheter withdrawal, and the 183 who had catheter withdrawal before postoperative day 3, were analysed in the epidural group. Compared with i.v. morphine, epidural analgesia (using both bupivacaine and morphine) achieved better pain control during the 3 days of administration, as expected. The incidence of postoperative death was 5.2% in the epidural group and 4.3% in the i.v. morphine group. No difference was noted between the groups in the occurrence of cardiovascular events, renal failure, gastrointestinal bleeding, acute hepatic failure, or sepsis. Respiratory complications were the only ones to be less frequent in the epidural group (23.3 vs 30.2% in the i.v. morphine group, respectively). The intention-to-treat analysis of the results of this study was questioned because of the significant number of patients who failed to complete the anaesthetic protocol; but it could be considered that the study design took into account that, in daily practice, some epidurals fail.

*Cardiac surgery.* The benefits of epidural/spinal anaesthesia have been discussed in cardiac surgery. The benefits of thoracic epidural anaesthesia include a decrease in the risk of dysrhythmias and pulmonary complications, and a reduction in the time to tracheal intubation, but no statistically significant improvement in the incidence of myocardial infarction and mortality has been demonstrated. However, in these circumstances, all benefits are outweighed by the risk of epidural haematoma related to full anticoagulation that is estimated to approximate 1/1500 patients.

*Surgical experience and the role of anaesthetists.* Such controversial results highlight the role of anaesthetists in the reduction of morbidity and mortality after surgery. This issue is indirectly addressed in a recent epidemiological study that focuses on mortality according to the surgeon’s experience of common procedures. The conclusion is that the experience of surgeons (assessed by the number of procedures performed per year) plays a significant role in various operations including carotid endarterectomy, oesophagectomy, pulmonary resection, and pancreatectomy. For many procedures, the impact of a surgeon’s volume of activity is critical and independent of the effect of hospital volume. When considering procedures such as carotid endarterectomy, mortality rate decreases exclusively with increasing surgeon experience. On the other hand, after pancreatectomy or thoracic surgery, mortality not only depends on surgeon volume but also on hospital volume, meaning that the experience and therapeutic choices made by other clinicians including anaesthetists, are a significant factor in patient outcome. For these procedures, the impact of anaesthetic and analgesic techniques on outcome is probably relevant and needs to be evaluated.

*Chronic pain after surgery.* Various surgical procedures such as thoracotomy for lung resection, inguinal hernia repair, and mastectomy are occasionally complicated by the development of chronic pain syndromes following surgery. High intensity and persisting postoperative pain could be risk factors for chronic pain after surgery. Effective pain control using epidural analgesia is related to a
lower incidence of chronic pain syndromes after thoracotomy, but no clear information is provided to explain the mechanism of action. In contrast, epidural analgesia is unable to prevent the occurrence of phantom pain after amputation. It is likely that several mechanisms such as central nervous system sensitization and peripheral nerve injury account for chronic pain syndromes after surgery, and consequently the questionable benefits of analgesic techniques to treat them.

Anaesthetic options, perioperative care, and patient rehabilitation

The treatment of postoperative pain not only aims to improve patient comfort but also to hasten recovery even after uncomplicated surgical procedures. Less invasive, stress-reducing surgical procedures, avoiding drains, nasogastric tubes, and bladder catheters, are the first steps in a programme, which included rapid mobilization, physiotherapy, oral feeding, and complete pain control, aiming to accelerate patient rehabilitation. Provision of effective pain relief is a prerequisite for accelerated convalescence. Fast track anaesthesia allows patients to recover organ function quickly. Following abdominal surgery, patients who have received epidural analgesia have a more rapid recovery of bowel motility, allowing prompt oral intake, and partly because of blunting of the neuroendocrine stress response to surgery, they experience less protein catabolism (Table 1). They also mobilize more rapidly, avoiding the consequences of bowel motility, allowing prompt oral intake, and partly because of blunting of the neuroendocrine stress response to surgery, they experience less protein catabolism (Table 1). Moreover, they are ready for hospital discharge earlier. The reduction in the duration of intensive care and hospital stay could outweigh the extra cost of the use of epidural analgesia for several days. In orthopaedic surgery, better analgesic control can improve the functional result of surgery and shorten the duration of rehabilitation, leading to a dramatic economic benefit. Nevertheless, because of other considerations such as the administrative culture of the hospital, and the health care system and a patient’s expectation of it, readiness for discharge is not always associated with a decrease in the duration of hospital stay. More appropriate organization of the postoperative management of surgical patients would include the benefit of epidural analgesia and the more extensive development of rehabilitation programmes.

Table 1 Benefits and disadvantages of epidural analgesia vs opioid PCA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Epidural analgesia (local anaesthetics)</th>
<th>Opioid PCA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain control</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At rest</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On mobilization</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side-effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotension</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postoperative ileus</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea–vomiting</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinary retention</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedation</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in postoperative morbidity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiovascular</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses workload</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

management and recovery of function after knee replacement: a randomized controlled trial. JAMA 2003; 290: 2411–18


18 Carl F, Halliday D. Continuous epidural blockade arrests the postoperative decrease in muscle protein fractional synthesis rate in surgical patients. Anesthesiology 1997; 86: 1033–40


26 Ho AM, Chung DC, Joyn GM. Neuromuscular blockade and hematoxa in cardiac surgery: estimating the risk of a rare adverse event that has (not) yet occurred. Chest 2000; 117: 551–5


Subramanian K, Subramanian B, Steinbrook RA. Ketamine as an adjuvant to opioids: a quantitative and qualitative systematic review. Anesth Analg 2004; 99: 482–95


