

## **PALLIATIVE CARE TIPS**

### **Issue # 19      Management of Noisy Respirations in Comatose Patients (“Death Rattle”)**

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#### **What is the significance of noisy respirations in the final hours to days of life?**

“Death rattle” is a common occurrence in the final hours to days of life.

#### **What is the mechanism of noisy respirations in the final hours to days of life?**

It is caused by turbulent airflow over retained oropharyngeal and bronchial secretions.

#### **How can we help patients and family members?**

1. Source of distress: It is often most upsetting to the family; however, it is not a source of distress for comatose patient.
2. Key Intervention: To educate, reassure and support the family before considering pharmacological intervention.
3. Non-pharmacological measures of potential benefit include positioning and suctioning.
4. Drug therapy: may be attempted to diminish secretions, however, the efficacy of this approach has not yet been rigorously evaluated.
5. No evidence: in withholding of hydration or administration of diuretics reduces secretions.

#### **What are the drugs of choice and how do we administer them?**

1. Hyoscine hydrobromide (Scopolamine) is commonly used (0.4 mg subcutaneously (sc) q4h prn); however, this drug should be avoided in conscious patients as it may precipitate anticholinergic delirium.
2. Hyoscine butylbromide (Buscopan 10-20 mg sc q1h pm) may be used.
3. Glycopyrrolate (0.2-0.4 mg sc q4h prn) has been suggested as an alternative that is less likely to cause CNS side effects.

**REMEMBER:** For referrals, questions, or telephone consultations call 496-1300 weekdays and weekends.

**Palliative Care Tips are now available on our Website: [www.palliative.org](http://www.palliative.org)**