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.

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