Crisis management during anaesthesia: desaturation

S M Szekely, W B Runciman, R K Webb, G L Ludbrook

Background: Desaturation occurs for many reasons under anaesthesia, some rare and obscure, and many potentially life threatening. The rapidity with which the cause is determined and appropriate management is instituted varies considerably between anaesthetists.

Objectives: To examine the role of a previously described “core” algorithm COVER ABCD–A SWIFT CHECK, supplemented by a specific sub-algorithm for desaturation, in the management of incidents of desaturation occurring in association with anaesthesia.

Methods: The potential performance of this structured approach for each of the relevant incidents among the first 4000 reported to the Australian Incident Monitoring Study (AIMS) was compared with the actual management as reported by the anaesthetists involved.

Results: Amongst the first 4000 incidents reported to AIMS there were 584 episodes of desaturation in association with general anaesthesia; 41% were dealt with by COVER, 48% by ABCD, and 11% required a specific desaturation sub-algorithm. Nearly a fifth of all desaturations were caused by endobronchial intubation. Within the specific desaturation subgroup, half were due to pulmonary problems in the form of underlying lung disease, excessive secretions or obesity and a third could not be diagnosed.

Conclusion: Desaturation may have many causes, some of which are obscure, and failure to respond promptly may place the patient at risk. In the face of persistent desaturation, management should consist of hand ventilation with 100% oxygen, completion of COVER ABCD–A SWIFT CHECK, and a return to a supine posture. Blood gases, chest radiography, and bronchoscopy may be required where desaturation is persistent and/or no apparent causes can be found.

METHODS

Of the first 4000 incidents reported to AIMS, those that made reference to desaturation were extracted and analysed for relevance, presenting features, type of surgery, cause, management and outcome. The COVER ABCD–A SWIFT CHECK algorithm, described elsewhere in this set of articles, was applied to each relevant report to determine the stages at which the problem might have been diagnosed and to confirm that activating the COVER portion would have led to appropriate initial steps being taken. As desaturation is not adequately dealt with by this algorithm, a specific sub-algorithm for desaturation was developed and its putative effectiveness was tested against the reports. How this was done is described elsewhere in this set of articles. The potential value of this structured approach—that is, the application of COVER ABCD–A SWIFT CHECK to the diagnosis and initial management of this problem, and the
application of the sub-algorithm for desaturation—was
assessed in the light of the AIMS reports by comparing its
potential effectiveness for each incident with that of the
actual management, as recorded in each report.

RESULTS
Amongst the first 4000 AIMS reports there were 706
incidents containing the keyword “desaturation”. Of these,
86 were excluded because they occurred before induction,
in the recovery ward, or under regional anaesthesia. A further
36 did not involve desaturation but mentioned it specifically
to exclude it in situations where it would have been expected.
Examples are rapidly detected circuit disconnections or
successful bag and mask ventilation during a difficult
intubation. This left 584 incidents for analysis.

The COVER algorithm
The COVER algorithm adequately diagnosed 237 of the 584
incidents (41%). The distribution of these figures is shown in
fig 1. Two incidents were diagnosed by cardiac arrest (C1)
and 10 were diagnosed at O (five involved the delivery of
hypoxic gas mixtures, four involved preoxygenation or mask
ventilation with no gas flow, and one was a common gas
outlet disconnection). Over 90% of the COVER incidents were
diagnosed at V1 or E1. Most of these would have been
detected at the “CHECK” phase—that is, during ventilation
by hand and/or checking the position and patency of the
endotracheal tube. Most of the V1 incidents involved leaks
and disconnects. Common gas outlet disconnects accounted
for many of these due to a failure to reconnect the hoses after
a change of circuit. This also implies a failure to check the
circuit before use as well as a failure to watch respiratory
movements in the rebreathing bag during preoxygenation.
Either of these manoeuvres would have immediately drawn
attention to the disconnection.

There were 138 incidents diagnosed at E1 (checking the
endotracheal tube), of which 103 were due to endobronchial
intubation. In spite of increased awareness of the problem,
endobronchial intubation remains a major cause of desatura-
tion during general anaesthesia. The diagnosis was made very
late in some of these incidents, with consequent morbidity
for the patient. One patient was reported to have suffered a
perioperative infarct, possibly as a result of prolonged
desaturation, and at least one had postoperative radiographic
evidence of lobar collapse. A further three patients had their
endobronchial intubation diagnosed by a postoperative CT
scan or chest radiograph in the ICU. In none of these
incidents did the narrative record any attempt to specifically
exclude endobronchial intubation. It is therefore tempting to
conclude that, with earlier recognition—for example, by use
of the COVER algorithm—much of this morbidity could have
been avoided. Given that endobronchial intubation accounts
for nearly one fifth of all reported desaturation incidents, it
should be actively sought and excluded early in the evolution
of the desaturation.

Eight incidents were resolved when monitors and equip-
ment were reviewed and found to be at fault (R).

ABCD algorithm
A further 281 incidents were dealt with by the ABCD
algorithm. Figure 2 shows the distribution of causes among
these categories. The majority (193 of 281) came under “A”
in the form of laryngospasm, aspiration, or difficult intuba-
tion. Most of these situations presented no diagnostic
challenge but required a sub-algorithm for further manage-
ment. There were 34 incidents under “B” due to hypoventila-
tion, bronchospasm, or pulmonary oedema. Hypoventilation
was responsible for most of these. Many were due to
coughing, straining or breath-holding, some with mask
ventilation, some with laryngeal masks, some after intuba-
tion, and some after extubation. Half of these arose in
intubated patients, with the degree of straining sufficient to
prevent adequate ventilation. Some of these patients desatur-
ated profoundly (50%) and needed to be re-anasthetised to
regain control of the situation. These incidents are dealt with
by specific sub-algorithms that are covered in other papers in
this series.

Desaturation algorithm
There remained 66 incidents (11%) in which neither COVER
nor ABCD had adequately managed the problem. These were

![Figure 1 Desaturation diagnosed by COVER (n = 237).](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excessive secretions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying lung disease</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity syndrome</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor error</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiovascular</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspected embolism</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not determine</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Table 1 Causes of desaturation in which neither COVER nor ABCD adequately dealt with the problem](table)
incidents in which desaturation occurred with no obvious cause from equipment, airway, circulation, etc. By definition, this was a more challenging group of incidents. The main causes of desaturation unaccounted for by COVER or ABCD are shown in table 1.

Secretions (n = 11)
Most of these incidents had one or more of the following features: heavy smoker (including recent ex-smoker), recent upper respiratory tract infection, child requiring grommets (middle ear ventilation tubes) or adenoidectomy, Down’s syndrome or other congenital neurological conditions.

Bronchial plugs or excessive secretions can produce a shunt effect which may be unmasked by the abolition of the homeostatic mechanism of hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction with the induction of anaesthesia, resulting in marked desaturation. Also included in this category was the case of a child undergoing nephrectomy for a peripheric abscess in whom the sudden deterioration was later explained by the finding that the abscess had extended into the lung and ruptured during surgery, soiling the bronchial tree with copious amounts of purulent fluid.

Underlying lung disease (n = 11)
All of these patients had some lung pathology that was either undiagnosed or underestimated before surgery. For example, a baby with known bronchopulmonary dysplasia and subglottic stenosis was turned on his side for insertion of a spinal with no monitoring in place. When the spinal block was completed and the child turned supine again, he was found to be profoundly cyanosed (SpO2 50%). Care with preoperative evaluation and anaesthetic technique may have averted some of these problems.

Monitor error (n = 5)
There were five incidents in which the reported desaturation was spurious. In one the oximeter showed marked desaturation, both with a finger probe and an ear probe, but a simultaneous blood gas analysis showed a PO2 of 458. A falsely low reading occurred in a patient with polycythaemia and one in a patient who was very cold. The remaining false readings occurred in a patient with tricuspid incompetence in whom the oximeter was sensing a venous pulse, and in a patient with an old arteriovenous fistula.

Notes:
If unstable or desaturated, see (5) on page 18*
FURTHER CARE
Reassess the situation
If persistent/unstable desaturation consider:
Completing/abandoning surgery
Chest X-ray, blood gases
If stable and well saturated, see (5) on page 17*
Wake the patient up and extubate
If unstable or desaturated, see (5) on page 18*
Admit to ICU/HDU

Figure 3 Desaturation.
Cardiovascular (n = 4)
There were four incidents in which desaturation occurred in conjunction with hypotension and arrhythmias. In one of these it was felt that the child may have reversed the flow across his known atrial septal defect, and in another a coarctation of the aorta was diagnosed in the recovery ward.

Suspected embolism (n = 4)
There were four cases in which the most likely diagnosis was an embolism, one of fat and three of gas. In each case a fall in saturation was associated with hypotension and a moderate to severe fall in end-tidal carbon dioxide. One of the cases occurred during hydrogen peroxide irrigation of a freshly curetted frontal lobe abscess cavity, one occurred during a laparoscopic cholecystectomy, and one during a nephroureterectomy.

Don’t know (n = 21)
Many of these were complex incidents involving already sick patients where the underlying problem was never resolved. In some the information provided by the reporter was inadequate while, in others, no conclusions were possible despite detailed reporting of the incident.

When the potential effectiveness of the structured approach, represented by the COVER ABCD–A SWIFT CHECK algorithm and the special sub-algorithm for desaturation (fig 3), was compared with that of the actual management as documented in each of the 584 relevant reports it was considered that, properly applied, the structured approach would have led to a quicker and/or better resolution of the problem in 16% of the incidents. A further 42% of all incidents required other specific sub-algorithms to manage the problem, such as laryngospasm,5 difficult intubation,6 and aspiration/regurgitation.7

There were a significant number of incidents in which use of the structured approach was deemed not to have outperformed the actual management described, in which the COVER algorithm had effectively been used by the reporting anaesthetist.

Within the subgroup of 66 incidents that required the specific desaturation sub-algorithm, it was felt that 15% of these would have been better handled by correct application of the algorithm. In most incidents this referred to failure to clearly work through a logical sequence, ventilate by hand on 100% oxygen, suction the airway, or check blood gases. There was a haphazard approach to finding a cause, an acceptance that desaturation had occurred and the fraction of inspired oxygen increased with no further attempt to elucidate a cause. In 14% it was not possible to determine what the cause of the desaturation was because of inadequate information in the reports. Overall, the majority of incidents in this subgroup were handled well even if the underlying cause could not be found. There were no incidents where use of the desaturation sub-algorithm was thought to have been likely to make the situation worse.

DISCUSSION
Desaturation is a common occurrence during general anaesthesia. It occurs for many reasons related to anaesthetic equipment and to the patient. There have been very few

| Table 2 | Timing of desaturation: number of incidents by cause and phase of anaesthetic |
|---------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|         | Induction | Maintenance | Emergence | Total |
| COVER   | 59        | 165         | 13        | 237   |
| A:      |           |             |           |       |
| Laryngospasm | 37 | 21 | 46 | 104 |
| Aspiration/regurgitation | 19 | 20 | 6 | 45 |
| Difficult intubation | 37 | 6 | 1 | 44 |
| B:      |           |             |           |       |
| Hypoventilation | 7 | 9 | 5 | 21 |
| Bronchospasm | 5 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| Pulmonary oedema | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| C:      |           |             |           |       |
| Hypotension | 1 | 6 | 0 | 7 |
| Bradycardia | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Myocardial ischaemia | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| D:      |           |             |           |       |
| Drugs | 7 | 10 | 6 | 23 |
| "A":   |           |             |           |       |
| Anaphylaxis | 3 | 6 | 0 | 9 |
| Embolism | 0 | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Pneumothorax | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Water intoxication | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Desaturation | 22 | 40 | 4 | 66 |
| Total | 197 | 302 | 85 | 584 |
| Percentage | 34% | 52% | 15% | |
Among the first 4000 incidents reported to AIMS there were 706 incidents (17.7%) with the key word “desaturation”. This makes desaturation one of the most frequently reported incidents under anaesthesia. For the purposes of this paper, only those incidents that occurred in the context of a general anaesthetic were considered. Incidents which occurred in patients undergoing regional or local anaesthesia, or which occurred before induction or after emergence, were excluded. Thus, there were 584 incidents for analysis.

Most desaturations (52%) occurred during the maintenance phase as shown in table 2. Those which occurred at induction were largely those where the cause was immediately obvious (for example, laryngospasm, difficult intubation, inadequate ventilation). However, these observations emphasise the importance of preoxygenation. Similarly, the greater proportion of the emergency desaturation incidents were due to obvious causes such as aspiration, laryngospasm, coughing, and breath holding. Again, 100% oxygen at emergence clearly represents good practice. The much bigger group of incidents occurring during the maintenance phase were from more obscure causes. More than half of these were diagnosed by the COVER algorithm and include a large contribution from endobronchial intubation. Numerous equipment related problems accounted for the rest.

Within the specific desaturation subgroup (the small group of difficult incidents not handled by COVER or ABCD), two thirds occurred during maintenance. This gives the lie to the popular notion that, once the anaesthetic has reached “cruising altitude”, all will remain well. These incidents were frequently difficult for the anaesthetist to unravel. Half of these were clearly due to pulmonary problems in the form of underlying lung disease which was unknown or underestimated before anaesthesia, to excessive secretions related to smoking or respiratory tract infection, and from the so-called “obesity syndrome”. In those patients with known lung disease, desaturation may occur for any number of reasons totally unrelated to their disease; the normal COVER algorithm should therefore be worked through to exclude other causes.

The widespread availability of pulse oximetry highlights the fact that anaesthetists may not observe cyanosis until there is marked desaturation. Thus, the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists requires that a pulse oximeter be available for the exclusive use of every anaesthetised patient. The importance of oximetry is highlighted by the fact that, in half the reported incidents, desaturation was the first warning that all was not well. Table 3 shows the pattern of desaturation as a first or second warning: 80% of the COVER related incidents were heralded by desaturation (table 3, fig 1), as were 80% of the specific desaturation sub-algorithm incidents. Even in the anaphylaxis and embolism incidents included in this paper, desaturation was often the first warning, rather than bronchospasm or hypocarbia, as would be expected. The incidents where desaturation was the second presentation were largely those where it was obvious that a problem had occurred, such as laryngospasm, aspiration, or difficult intubation.

There remained a third of the desaturation sub-algorithm group in which the underlying cause was not found. Some of these were due to inadequate information on the forms, but many were because the reporting anaesthetist was faced with a complex clinical situation in which a number of potential factors were involved. In most of these the management of the incident was good, in that all attempts were made to maintain oxygenation while finding a cause.

The resulting structured approach to managing clinical desaturation, as appears in the Crisis Management Manual, is detailed in fig 3. Finally, it is important that a full explanation of what happened be given to the patient and the problem clearly documented in the anaesthetic record. If a particular precipitating event was significant or a particular action was useful in resolving the crisis, this should be clearly explained and documented.

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