



31 January, 2023

Managing patient risk factors a key to successful surgery, say anaesthetists

The recent deaths of high-profile Australians after elective joint surgery may have concerned patients and their families, according to the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists.

ANZCA President Dr Chris Cokis says it is timely to reassure people who are preparing for an operation that modern anaesthesia and surgery in Australia are safer than they have ever been.

“Anaesthetists are medical specialists committed to the safe and high quality care of their patients through years of clinical training, informed by research evidence. Australian anaesthetists know how to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of the anaesthesia care they provide.”

“Elective surgery, particularly joint surgery such as hip replacements, is very safe for many people but those with complicated medical conditions or who are frail or elderly are at greater risk of complications including death after surgery. This highlights the need for even better care before, during and after surgery and that is where anaesthetists play a leading role in the emerging discipline of perioperative medicine.”

Perioperative teams can reduce risks by tailoring treatment for individual patients before and during their surgery once in the operating room. Further, high quality care after surgery is also crucial to ensure that any complications are assessed and managed. Perioperative medicine is a shift away from traditional ideas of surgical and anaesthesia complications to a more holistic view of perioperative complications.

ANZCA Vice-President Professor David Story, Foundation Chair of Anaesthesia, and head, Department of Critical Care, The University of Melbourne, was the lead investigator in a landmark research study that examined complications and mortality in patients aged 70 and over.

The 2010 study of nearly 4200 non-cardiac older surgical patients in 23 hospitals in Australia and New Zealand concluded that patient factors often had a stronger association with mortality than the type of surgery. The study called for strategies to reduce complications and mortality in older surgical patients.

Professor Story says even with the best care, joint surgery often involves physiological stress on the body which is likely to be a key factor in any complications.

“Older and sicker people are often less resilient to the physiological stress of surgery and anaesthesia. Patients with broken hips who need non-elective joint surgery have much greater physiological stress and far more complications than for elective joint surgery.”

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