

## **JOHN HOWARD STORY: ANAPHYLACTIC SHOCK AND ANAESTHESIA**

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The severe reaction to anaesthesia experienced by former prime minister John Howard on Friday that caused him to spend two nights in hospital is very rare, according to the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA).

Mr Howard was having routine dental treatment at Castlecrag Private Hospital when he suffered an anaphylactic reaction and was taken to Royal North Shore Private Hospital by ambulance.

ANZCA spokesman, Dr Mark Priestley, said an "anaphylactic" or "allergic" reaction to anaesthetic drugs occurred in about one in every 10,000 anaesthetics.

He said it was caused by the body's immune system "overreacting" to the ingestion or injection of a foreign substance such as a drug.

Dr Priestley said anaesthetists recognised the reaction when the patient developed a skin rash, asthma-like breathing difficulties or occasionally a very low blood pressure or even cardiac arrest.

"Anaesthetists are trained to look out for this reaction and are trained to treat it if it occurs," Dr Priestley said.

"It is a life-threatening complication, but with appropriate vigilance and management the mortality is very low, even for severe reactions."

The treatment often requires observation and management in an intensive care unit for a variable period of time (hours to days) afterwards.

The diagnosis is usually confirmed by skin and blood tests about six to eight weeks after the episode, where the exact drug causing the problem can be identified.

Once identified, the drug can be avoided in future anaesthetics, so that the risk of further anaesthetics is extremely low.

"It is important to tell your anaesthetist if you have had such a reaction to a previous anaesthetic and bring the results of your diagnostic tests," Dr Priestley said.

**To interview Dr Priestley please contact ANZCA Media  
Manager Clea Hincks on (03) 9093 4917 OR 0418 583 276**