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Magic tricks helping to calm children before operations

Using simple magic tricks to help children relax before operations has been hailed as a successful anaesthesia tool in a new medical reference book.

The success of the “magical distraction” approach on young patients is highlighted in the latest edition of *Australasian Anaesthesia*, a peer-reviewed reference for the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists’ (ANZCA) 8200 anaesthetists, 580 specialist pain medicine physicians, and nearly 2000 anaesthesia and pain medicine trainees. The reference is published every two years.

Dr Craig Sims, a specialist Perth-based paediatric anaesthetist, describes how he uses engaging magic tricks to calm children before their surgery. After decades of practice and uptake by other doctors, many patients now ask for the ‘magic doctor’ if they need to return for another operation.

“Magical distraction is so strong, children can be thrilled and laughing as they fall asleep, which would be expected to reduce the likelihood of emergence delirium,” he explains.

“The tricks also distract and relax the parent, are enjoyed by staff . . . This is a powerful form of distraction because children don’t usually see or experience magic close-up,” he writes.

The specialty of anaesthesia is being celebrated in ANZCA’s National Anaesthesia Day on Monday 16 October in hospitals across Australia and New Zealand. This year’s theme “Caring for our sickest patients before, during and after surgery” is aimed at highlighting the importance of co-ordinated and personalised care of patients.

The editor of *Australasian Anaesthesia*, Associate Professor Matt Doane, says Dr Sims (who learnt magical distraction while practising in the US), has been using magic tricks on patients as young as four for nearly 20 years.

“We often rely on giving patients (especially children) medications to help calm them prior to an operation. Dr Sims demonstrates an elegant and low-tech skill for how children can be distracted by using three simple magic tricks before their operation. The magical distraction approach had been found to be an effective, powerful, and engaging way of reducing children’s anxiety as they are prepared for their operation.”

“Most of our younger patients arrive with some device to distract them. The fact that they don’t expect a doctor to spontaneously engage with them by using magic tricks enhances how well these techniques can help relax their anxiety.” he explains.

“Although these tricks need some skill, this form of distraction is extremely practical, with the added benefit of being cheap, mobile, reliable, and easily accessed anywhere in the operating theatre.”

Dr Sims notes that the impact of magical distraction can be so strong that children can not only be relaxed, but even thrilled and laughing as they fall asleep, and this can perhaps even reduce the likelihood of delirium when in the recovery room.

The magic “bag of tricks” he always has at hand involves a zig zag pencil, expanding sponge balls, and a magic colouring book. All are available online from magic shops.

- **Zig Zag pencil:** The pencil is shown to the child before the procedure as proof that the child really will have magical powers. This trick requires zero skill and takes 30 to 60 seconds, during which a pencil appears to be chopped into three pieces, then magically re-joined.
- **Expanding sponge balls:** It is an impressive trick that makes one ball become two, and then two become three, all in the child’s hand. The child is then left holding the three balls and challenged to turn them into four. The child becomes distracted right up to entering theatre, excited at the thought of learning how to make four. This trick is sophisticated enough to distract anxious teenagers, as they can become very nervous at the time of induction even though they usually maintain their cooperation.
- **Magic colouring book in theatre:** As the child enters the theatre, their attention is immediately grabbed by holding up the colouring book to show them. This way, they look at it and not around theatre. Now is also the time to make the fourth ball appear. Either as the trolley is brought into the induction room, or positioned beside the operating table, or as the child walks up to the table to climb onto it. The fourth ball appearing is a ‘wow’ moment for the child (and parent) and makes them happy to climb onto the operating table or be in the induction room.

According to international research cited in *Australasian Anaesthesia* the signs of anxiety in children before their operation can include crying, screaming, becoming withdrawn and sad, and being uncooperative.

One sign of anxiety occurs in 42 per cent of two- to 10-year-olds and three or more signs are seen at up to 17 per cent when the anaesthetic is given to the child.

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