

Beware of the hidden trigger: A survey of the awareness of chlorhexidine anaphylaxis in East of England

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Introduction

Chlorhexidine is ubiquitous among healthcare products. It is the third most common agent linked to allergic reaction associated with general anaesthesia. We wished to ascertain the level of awareness among anaesthetists of chlorhexidine as a potential trigger for anaphylactic reaction and of the referral process in the East of England region.

Methods

All anaesthetic departments across the East of England region were invited to participate in an online survey. This consisted of 10 questions pertaining to awareness of commonly used products containing chlorhexidine, awareness that chlorhexidine is becoming an increasingly common trigger for anaphylactic reaction, the availability of chlorhexidine-free products, and the referral and follow-up pack process. An opportunity to suggest strategies which could improve this process was also provided.

Results

A total of 158 anaesthetists from various grades responded. Over 50% were consultants. Over 72% of respondents knew that their department had an "anaphylaxis kit" for emergency usage. The majority of anaesthetists (83%) knew how to refer patients for further investigation. Only 17.9% of respondents routinely checked whether or not the CVP line contained chlorhexidine. Nearly 61% of anaesthetists were not sure whether or not chlorhexidine-free CVP line was available in the department. Only 44% of anaesthetists were aware that Instillagel contains chlorhexidine. Over 67% of respondents were aware that chlorhexidine is increasingly commonly identified as a trigger for anaphylactic reaction. However, only 57% considered it would be useful to have chlorhexidine-free products available with the "anaphylaxis kit". Over 79% thought it would be practical to have follow-up packs with the kit.

Discussion

If chlorhexidine is not considered as a potential trigger, patients will inevitably be further exposed to it during management of potential anaphylactic reactions during anaesthesia, through procedures such as arterial line, CVP line and catheter insertion. The AAGBI Guidelines have recommended avoiding the use of chlorhexidine if there is suspicion of anaphylactic reaction associated with anaesthesia. Readily available chlorhexidine-free products are vital to prevent further exposure. Furthermore, referral and follow-up to ascertain the triggering agent is crucial for the future safety of the patient. Simplifying the referral process greatly increases the likelihood of all the necessary steps being taken. However as more hospitals are implementing paperless IT systems; follow-up packs might be more effective if placed on intranet.