How Many Acute Pain Services Are There in the United States, and Who Is Managing Patient-controlled Analgesia?

To the Editor.—Anesthesia-based acute pain services were described in 1988. Although many have appeared subsequently both in academic and private practice settings, there is little information regarding the number of acute pain services in the United States.

Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) is an important modality that has been used widely by anesthesiologists to manage acute pain, but recent economic and political factors have prompted some anesthesiologists to stop providing PCA or to relegate this method of care to others. There is no published information characterizing current PCA management patterns in the United States.

A survey was undertaken in April 1994 to examine these two issues. The survey started with a list of 2,254 hospitals in the country with 100 beds or more. After stratifying these institutions geographically to ensure country-wide representation, a sample of 500 was randomly selected. A questionnaire was mailed to the directors of anesthesiology departments at each institution. It contained the following questions:

1. Is there an anesthesiology-based acute pain service in your hospital?
2. Is PCA used in your hospital?
3. What group(s) of physicians manage PCA: anesthesiologists, surgeons, oncologists, other (specify)?
4. What is the ZIP code of your hospital?

Responses were received from 324 (65%) of the institutions surveyed. Tables 1 and 2 show the information obtained.

The proportion of respondents (73%) indicating the existence of an anesthesiology-based acute pain service was surprisingly large. Because all institutions were randomly selected and their responses were anonymous, it is not known what proportion of these were academic centers and what proportion came from private practice.

Because the term "anesthesiology-based acute pain service" was intentionally not defined, it is likely that the time and resources applied to acute pain management vary widely among respondents.

PCA is now used, at least to some extent, in almost all American hospitals with 100 or more beds. Anesthesiologists are still the largest single group managing PCA, although there are substantial numbers of other therapists.

I. Brian Ready, M.D., F.R.C.P.(C.)
Professor
Department of Anesthesiology RN-10
Director
Acute Pain Service
University of Washington Medical Center
University of Washington School of Medicine
Seattle, Washington 98195

References

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Table 1. Participating Institutions

| Institutions with an anesthesiology-based acute pain service | 236 (73) |
| Institutions offering patient-controlled analgesia | 310 (96) |

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