

Less is more when it comes to patient blood management for surgery



What on earth is patient blood management for surgery? Well, it's having surgery using blood products only when absolutely necessary, and there is growing evidence that this approach improves patient outcomes. Aiming to avoid using blood products in surgery is a key component of Patient Blood Management programs which advocate a 'less is more approach' when it comes to having a blood transfusion.

"Patient Blood Management is an organised approach through all phases of a patient's management to reduce the dependence on transfused products which then improves patient outcomes," explains Dr Simon Towler, Intensive Care Specialist and Chief Medical Officer at the WA Department of Health. "There is new evidence that not transfusing patients gives them a better outcome after surgery. Wherever possible it is best if the patient has a normal blood count beforehand."

Dr Towler stresses this new approach doesn't mean the way blood transfusions have been utilised in the past is wrong, but rather new evidence is pointing to a different way to managing patients to give them a better outcome.

"If a patient is booked to have elective surgery and they are anaemic beforehand, many will have a better response after the surgery if their anaemia is corrected before the surgery with treatment as simple as oral iron supplements," he explains. "We know that patients who have surgery when they are anaemic have higher complication and mortality rates after surgery, and there is a greater chance they will require a blood transfusion. This approach before surgery is important since we also know that giving patients oral iron supplements after surgery does not work."

Aiming to undertake surgery without giving blood is also a way to implement blood conservation measures which is a win-win situation for patients and the nation's blood supply. Blood transfusions are more commonly used for treating patients over 70 years of age, which is a growing demographic, whereas the younger population able or willing to donate blood is diminishing. Blood is a precious resource, and this situation is pointing to a future supply risk.

“We will be able to use less blood where it is actually not needed, which means it is available in situations where it really is needed,” explains Dr Towler. “This is important because the supply we will need for an ageing population will be difficult to sustain.”

Dr Towler says Haematologists (pathologists who are specialists in blood) are critical to implementing Patient Blood Management programs, especially when it comes to recognising and treating pre-operative anaemia and iron deficiency.

“We need to ensure General Practitioners and Surgeons recognise iron deficiency in their patients and treat it, and Haematologists will be a key part in ensuring this happens,” he says. “We need to change according to new evidence, as medicine has always done in the past, and that points to blood management programs, including bloodless surgery, to improve patient outcomes.”

For more information on this new approach go to www.mybloodsite.com

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