



Revista Colombiana de Anestesiología

Colombian Journal of Anesthesiology

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Essay

Obstetric analgesia: Current situation and alternatives[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 December 2016

Accepted 20 January 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Analgesia

Analgesia, obstetrical

Analgesia, epidural

Acute pain

Labor, obstetric

ABSTRACT

Pain management is part of the comprehensive approach to all patients and results in clear benefits. As such, obstetric analgesia seeks to reduce pain and provide better care during labour. However, its use is sometimes limited due to lack of access to, or availability of, anaesthesia services. Alternative techniques to the epidural analgesic approach are found in the literature, for use by general practitioners or healthcare staff in lower complexity settings. This article discusses general aspects of epidural obstetric analgesia, and other pharmacological and non-pharmacological management options.

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Analgesia obstetrica: Situación actual y alternativas

RESUMEN

El manejo del dolor hace parte del abordaje integral de todos los pacientes y muestra claros beneficios. En este sentido, la analgesia obstétrica busca disminuir el dolor y brindar una mejor atención durante el trabajo de parto. A pesar de ello, su uso se ve limitado en ocasiones por falta de acceso o disponibilidad del servicio de anestesiología. En base a esto, en la literatura se encuentran técnicas alternativas al abordaje peridural para manejo analgesico, las cuales pueden ser empleadas por medicos generales o personal de salud de menor nivel de complejidad. Este artículo abordará aspectos generales sobre la analgesia obstétrica epidural, y otras opciones de manejo farmacológicas y no farmacológicas.

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Palabras clave:

Analgesia

Analgesia obstétrica

Analgesia epidural

Dolor agudo

Trabajo de parto

[☆] Please cite this article as: Gomezese OF, Ribero BE. Analgesia obstetrica: Situación actual y alternativas. Rev Colomb Anestesiolog. 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rca.2017.01.002>

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Table 1 – Management of obstetric analgesia: alternative techniques.

Type of technique	Technique	Effectiveness	Complications
Pharmacological	Peridural block	+++	+
	Combined analgesia	++++	+++
	Peripheral block (paracervical)	++	++
	Peripheral block (Pudendal)	++	++
	Inhaled: nitrous oxide	+	–
	Inhaled: halogenated agent (sevoflurane)	+	+++
	IV analgesia: opioids	++	+
Non-pharmacological	<i>Relaxation techniques</i>		
	Water immersion	+	–
	Massage	+	–
	Acupuncture	+	–
	Breathing modulation	+	–
	Music and audio-analgesia	+	–
	Aromatherapy	+	–
	<i>Psychological techniques</i>		
	Hypnosis	+	–
	<i>Mechanical techniques</i>		
	TENS	+	–

Source: Authors.

Introduction and objectives

At the present time, obstetric analgesia in the context of the Colombian health system is covered by the Mandatory Health Plan.¹ However, this intervention is not always used routinely, and its use is estimated to be higher in developed countries as compared to developing countries. In our setting, most of these procedures are performed in patients enrolled in pre-paid or private medicine plans, partly due to the inequity of the system and the ability to gain access to the procedure.² Notwithstanding, all obstetric patients must be the subject of comprehensive care, and pain management must be an important component of the approach to these patients, given that studies have found that the absence of analgesia during labour is associated with a higher risk of postpartum depression and post-traumatic stress. Moreover, pain is considered as an unnecessary source of distress.³ This article presents the results of a review of this topic, as well as useful management alternatives.

Method

The literature was reviewed, including several primary and secondary data sources covering the past 6 years (2009–2005) found in databases such as PubMed, Cochrane, and in anaesthesia and health publications listed in the References. The articles for analysis were selected from those bibliographic sources and they are presented from the authors' point of view.

Topic development

Obstetric analgesia is used with the aim of alleviating pain during labour. At the present time, one of the most widely used techniques is peridural analgesia, based on the use of

drug infusion into this virtual space to create sensory blockade. This pain is now known to originate as a result of uterine contraction and cervical dilatation stimuli that travel up the spinal cord (T10-L1). This process triggers an adaptive hormonal response and rising cortisol and catecholamine levels.⁴

Epidural obstetric analgesia has not shown to have an impact on the rate of caesarean sections or neonatal Apgar scores. However, it has been associated with an increase in instrumented delivery when given during the expulsive phase; hence the need to perform it early on (during the latency and active phases).⁵ For the technique, the patient is placed in lateral decubitus, the intervertebral space (L3-L4) is palpated, the peridural space is localised (loss of resistance or use of saline solution), and, finally, a No. 18–16 infusion catheter is introduced. It was shown in one study that there is no significant difference in terms of the type of method used for localising the peridural space when the anaesthetist is trained in both techniques.⁶

This type of analgesia is considered as the best management tool. However, despite good effectiveness and safety, it does entail complications, including neurological abnormalities during the peripartum period: lateralised analgesia (16.4%), vessel puncture (8.7%), paresthesias (8.2%), difficult technique (5.2%), ineffective analgesia (2.7%), and arterial hypotension (2.5%). In the postpartum period, complications include lumbar pain (18.5%), urinary retention (3.4%), post dural puncture headache (1.4%), and peripheral neuropathy (0.9%).⁷

Additionally, mention is made in the literature of both pharmacological and non-pharmacological alternatives to peridural analgesia (see Table 1). These vary in effectiveness and are used in case of failure or unavailability of the procedure.⁸

Pharmacological therapies include combined analgesia consisting of the administration of a dose of anaesthetic

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