Frequently Asked Questions about the Use of Sedatives
Last update: 7-11-18

Ketamine use in the pre-hospital setting

Is ketamine use common and is it safe to use?

Hennepin EMS has been using ketamine as the standard of care for patients safely since 2008. More than one-third of paramedics surveyed nationally have ketamine available to them to care for agitated patients. It is one of several sedatives that paramedics can use to treat patients and its use for these types of medical situations is well-documented in medical and scientific literature.

Is ketamine used by other EMS agencies in the metro area?

Yes. Ketamine is a standard drug that is one of the sedatives available for use by EMS agencies in the metro area and it is also used across the U.S.

Are individuals given a sedative for any non-medical reason?

No. The decision sedate a patient is made by the medical professional at the pre-hospital scene. The paramedic makes this decision based on medical necessity and is not under the direction of law enforcement or any other non-medical personnel.

Ketamine Study

Are you currently conducting any studies related to the effects of the use of ketamine on agitated patients?

On June 25, 2018 a study that compared data for patients who received one type of approved sedative to data for patients who received another type of approved sedative was paused. This means that Hennepin Healthcare is no longer collecting and reviewing the data, but paramedics are still using nationally-recognized protocols and on the ground patient assessments to treat patients in emergency. The study was considered observational and “low risk” by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees patient safety in research studies at our institution.

Who is paying for the ketamine study?

The ketamine study does not have outside funding. The time involved was covered by internal resources.

What is a “waiver of consent”?

One approved option for studies with specific situations is referred to as a “waiver of consent.” The majority of studies that allow a waiver of consent involve minimal risks to subjects. This is the category of the ketamine study where we were collecting data.

To qualify for waiver of consent with minimal risk the study must follow specific federally regulated ethical standards. This is the process followed by other academic medical centers in the United States.

When study results are submitted for publication, the reviewing organization demands that these rules are followed exactly – otherwise the data that was collected will not be accepted and the entire study is rejected.
What is your response to community concerns about having a “waiver of consent”?

The federal requirements (45 CFR 46.116(d)) from the IRB approval process for this study were followed – including the waiver of consent. This met the ethical standards under which we conduct research, which we take very seriously. However, we understand the concerns recently raised about general awareness of the study. For this reason we are committing to a higher level of transparency that goes beyond the federal regulations to ensure greater community engagement in our work to improve patient care moving forward.

Why does Hennepin Healthcare conduct medical studies?

Our mission is to “partner with our community, our patients and their families to ensure access to outstanding care for everyone, while improving health and wellness through teaching, patient and community education, and research.” This mission requires us to conduct medical studies that inform the safest and best care for vulnerable populations. It is also critical to ensuring that data used to determine treatment and best practices adequately represent the communities we serve. Medical studies are an essential part of our mission that can’t be separated from providing outstanding care.

Hennepin EMS Paramedics and the Minneapolis P.D.

Did Hennepin EMS paramedics use ketamine at the request of Minneapolis police officers?

No. Paramedics are highly trained medical professionals who make critical life-saving decisions every day. These decisions often involve determining needed care or treatment in crisis situations. When leadership at Hennepin EMS learned of concerns earlier this year around police asking paramedics to use ketamine both MPD and Hennepin EMS leadership reminded their staffs that medical direction to use a sedative, like ketamine, is the sole responsibility of the paramedics.

All patients receiving sedation for agitation are transported to an emergency department and are never taken directly to jail. In addition, individuals being detained by police are not given sedation because they committed – or are suspected of committing – a crime. Sedatives are only given when a patient’s agitation is a medical emergency and requires the care that only a paramedic is able to provide outside of the hospital.

According to the draft report, patients already in restraints were given a sedative. Why?

Even when someone is restrained, he or she can remain or become extremely agitated which increases the risk of harm to themselves and others. While a patient in restraints may appear calm at one point in time, they may, at any point thereafter, resume self-destructive behavior and cause injury to themselves or others. They are also at risk of developing a life-threatening medical condition known as metabolic acidosis, which causes buildup of waste products in the body when patients exert themselves uncontrollably in restraints, and this can result in death. It would be irresponsible to allow patients in this condition to seriously harm themselves when there are safe interventions available.

What’s being done to address some of the concerning and unprofessional discussion between police officers and paramedics described in the draft report?

We understand and acknowledge the issues raised regarding professional communication between police and paramedics in the cases referenced by the draft report. While these conversations were difficult to read, they do not represent the values of Hennepin Healthcare. We apologize for any distrust this may have created. We have
requested an independent review of the cases involved in the draft report, and we are committed to taking every action necessary to ensure that professionalism is maintained at all times.