About Anesthesia Awareness

- Anesthesia awareness, also referred to as unintentional intraoperative awareness, is a rare but serious event that occurs when a patient under general anesthesia stays or becomes conscious during surgery, but can’t move or talk because paralytics are in effect.

- Anesthesia awareness effects between 20,000 and 40,000 of the approximately 21 million people in the U.S. who receive general anesthesia every year.

- Although rare, many people who experience anesthesia awareness often report suffering from related trauma and sustained emotional effects, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

- There are two types of awareness: explicit recall or implicit recall. Explicit recall is characterized by recall of almost all of the events in the operating room, from the discussions among the surgical team to the actual procedure itself. Implicit recall is characterized by flashbacks and anxiety after the surgery has taken place.

- Certain characteristics that may increase a patients' risk for anesthesia awareness include patients on beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers or other drugs that can mask the physiological responses to inadequate anesthesia, patients with a history of awareness, patient's with a history of substance use or abuse and surgeries that have a higher rate of occurrence.

- While there is currently no proven technique to prevent anesthesia awareness, professional guidelines suggest different approaches to reducing its incidence.

Professional Practice Guidelines & Recommendations

- In an effort to better address the phenomenon of anesthesia awareness, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations (JCAHO) issued a Sentinel Event Alert in 2004 to encourage further research and collaboration in the medical community. The Alert called for the major anesthesia professional societies to address the adequacy of current monitoring of anesthesia levels, including those that involve no technological support.

- In 2005, the American Society of Anesthesiology issued a “Practice Advisory for Intraoperative Awareness and Brain Function Monitoring,” which advocates using multiple monitoring options, including clinical techniques, conventional monitoring and brain function monitoring or level-of-consciousness monitoring, to assess anesthetic depth and reduce the likelihood of intraoperative awareness.

- Although the Advisory states that brain monitoring is not indicated for all patients, it concludes that the decision to use a brain function monitor should be made on a case-by-case basis for selected patients.

- The American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) also supports practices considered beneficial in minimizing the incidence of unintended awareness under general anesthesia, including brain function monitoring according to their position statement.