

Anesthesiologists and Substance Use Disorders: An Important Issue for All Members of the Health Team

To the Editor

In their recent editorial, Schonwald et al.¹ pointed out an important issue for all perioperative health care providers. As they documented, a number of prominent physicians in the history of medicine, including anesthesiologists, became addicted to morphine. However, as the editorial emphasizes, substance use disorders are a significant present-day problem as well.

Addiction is a primary chronic disease where abnormalities in prefrontal brain function have been identified. It is associated with neural deficits related to inhibitory control and error processing. Therefore, individuals with substance dependence have an inability to control their behavior, most clearly evidenced by the inability to abstain from substances of abuse.²

Anesthesiologists may suffer addiction to several substances although addiction to opioids remains the most common (66% of cases overall). Among opioids, fentanyl and sufentanil are at the top of the list. The next most frequent are anesthesia induction agents (20%) and benzodiazepines (15%).^{3,4}

During my residency, I worked with 2 people (1 colleague and 1 nurse) with fentanyl addiction. They did not receive any treatment and died from fentanyl overdose as a consequence. I agree with the policies mentioned by authors that can be put in place, such as random urine, hair drug testing, and mandatory drug testing in suspected cases.

As explained by Schonwald et al.,¹ anesthesiologists appear to be more susceptible to substance abuse. In

addition to the reasons mentioned in their article, chronic exposure to low doses of aerosolized anesthetic agents in the operating room may cause neurobiological sensitization to the reinforcing effects of these substances, facilitating later addiction.⁵

I want to reinforce the views expressed by Schonwald et al.¹ We must be vigilant to the risks of addiction. This applies to our family, our professional colleagues, and all individuals in the work environment. If the problem is identified, it can be treated. In the health care environment, addiction treatment may not only save the life of the addict but may also save those patients entrusted to his or her care.

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