LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AWARENESS DURING ANAESTHESIA

SIR,

I read the article by Dr. Jacob Mainzer (September, 1979) on awareness under anaesthesia with great interest. Having interviewed 17 patients with documented awareness under anaesthesia, there are a number of points that I would like to make.

First, the expectations of the patient undergoing anaesthesia have a great deal to do with the way in which awareness is experienced. In our institution, patients who are undergoing Caesarian section under general anaesthesia are told that they may be aware and experience pain. As with most parturients, they expect that delivery will be associated with a certain amount of pain. As a result, awareness is not a traumatic surprise to the patients. None of the 17 spontaneously reported cases of awareness that we saw came from the labour floor. The results of a concurrently performed questionnaire indicated that some of those parturients did, in fact, experience awareness during Caesarian section but did not think it worth reporting. I would be interested in knowing if there were any spontaneous reports of awareness during Caesarian section under general anaesthesia among Dr. Mainzer's patients.

Second, emotional responses to awareness under anaesthesia cannot be looked at simply in terms of the response to the event in and of itself. In my series of patients the emotional response to awareness and pain seemed independent of the amount of pain and its duration. Among my patients I saw responses from complete dismissal and denial of the significance of the trauma at one extreme to marked anger, anxiety and agitation at the other. The response to awareness seems to be based on a concurrence of several factors which include the reason for the surgery, the patient's emotional response to his or her illness and the pre-existing personality structure of the patient. My experience has been that a "sympathetic and forthright explanation of the event" is often not enough to assuage the patient's feelings. In some cases, psychiatric consultation and psychotherapy may be necessary to help the patient to deal with the event.

All but one of my 17 patients found the lack of control and inability to communicate their dis-

stress with any of the medical staff to be more traumatic than the actual pain itself. It is my belief that the use of ear plugs and distracting music under those circumstances would contribute to the aware patient's feeling of distance and inability to communicate and could potentially make the response to awareness worse than it might otherwise be.

I concur heartily with Dr. Mainzer's assertion that awareness under anaesthesia is a potentially serious problem and that compulsive attention to all of the details of anaesthetic management and equipment function is necessary to prevent this hazard of anaesthesia.

The anaesthetist should not forget that there are hospital-based psychiatrists who can be called upon to help manage catastrophic psychological reactions when they occur.

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CARDIOPULMONARY RESUSCITATION

SIR,

Re: CPR and the Canadian Anaesthetist.

The recent letter by Hew, *et al.*¹ indicates a disturbing degree of misunderstanding which would be tragic if it were the prevalent view in the profession.

Although anaesthetists have generally been considered leaders in the field of resuscitation, recent studies have indicated a generally poor calibre of performance in Basic CPR (Basic Life Support), among both specialist anaesthetists and qualified physicians in general.²⁻⁴ This may be due to an infrequent need for CPR in the operating room and failure to take a leading role in teaching CPR.

The Canadian Heart Foundation became the sponsor for CPR in 1976 largely by default, because of lack of interest and leadership by medical bodies, including The Canadian Anaesthetists' Society. The Canadian Heart Foundation undertook to coordinate CPR training in Canada, by bringing together provincial representatives and associate agencies to establish standards and develop a training network. With the guidance of specialists from a number of health fields, including anaesthesia, great progress has been made in a relatively short period