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Children who have their tonsils out suffer significant pain

Children need more pain relief than a bowl of ice cream and jelly after having their tonsils out and parents should be better schooled at providing pain relief after the procedure, anaesthetists urge.

Across Australia and New Zealand about 20,000 tonsillectomies are performed on children every year, which makes it a frequent operation, according to anaesthetist Dr David Bramley.

While the rationale for the procedure in the last 20 years has changed from recurrent tonsillitis and throat infections to an intervention for sleep disorders, including obstructive sleep apnoea, it remains a painful procedure.

Dr Bramley said a small study from the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne found that half of the children in their sample saw a general practitioner for pain management within a week of their surgery.

"It is unclear if this finding is representative of the broader paediatric population" Dr Bramley said.

Dr Bramley told the Clinical Trials Network meeting of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) at the weekend that a proposal for a multicentre trial of 1000 children undergoing tonsillectomy would examine the frequency of post-operative visits to the local GP and the frequency of return to hospital for pain management.

"Having your tonsils out is a painful procedure and we want to look at how the families can better manage their children's pain at home."

Pain from tonsillectomy generally peaked at five to seven days after the procedure. It is unclear why this happened but it could have to do with scarring and healing, he said.

"We can prepare parents and caregivers to be more proactive with analgesia after discharge," Dr Bramley said.

Often paracetamol alone does not give sufficient pain relief and alternative analgesics may have potential risks including bleeding and respiratory depression.

The study hopes to establish a new, evidence-based approach to pain relief after tonsillectomy.

The Anaesthesia and Pain Medicine Foundation of ANZCA supports research projects across the fields of anaesthesia and pain medicine. ANZCA established the Anaesthesia and Pain Medicine Foundation in 2007 to support medical research and education.

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