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Exploring the black box of consenting in Pediatric Neurosurgery: quality assurance at a pediatric neurosurgical centre

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Introduction: Consenting paediatric patients for surgical procedures is inherently unique in that it is underpinned by principles such as parental responsibility, assessment of the capacity of the child to consent and adherence to national/legal guidelines. Little is known about parents' perspectives and the process by which they make the decision. We prospectively evaluate our consenting process and parents' recollection and understanding of information provided to identify any scope for improvement.

Methods: Our study used a qualitative descriptive design. The parents of fifty children needing neurosurgical procedures over a 3-month period (September-December 2013) were given a questionnaire to evaluate the consenting process during their child's hospital admission. Parents completed the questionnaire and submitted it anonymously at anytime up to point of discharge. Data analysis was performed using content analysis method.

Results: A total of 50 patients were included in our pilot audit. All parents understood the primary diagnosis and type of surgery. Procedure specific risks were understood by 98%. Only 84% could recollect the mentioning of general including anaesthetic risks for the procedure.

With regards to the options of management, only 24% felt that alternatives to surgery were discussed. Of the remaining parents, 58% recollected that surgery was mentioned as the "only option" and 42% reported that no alternatives were discussed.

Although all parents felt they had made an informed decision regarding consent to surgery, 12% identified that the timing and ways in which they received information during the consent process could be improved.

Conclusion: Informed consent is more than just a signature on a paper. It is shared decision-making process between the surgeon, patient and their guardian/carer. Providing sufficient information is essential for parents to make informed decisions regarding their child's treatment. Our pilot audit highlights multiple areas for improvement in this critical process.