Topic: Difficult Airway Evaluation

Scenario

A patient’s primary physician is called to the bedside to evaluate the patient due to increased work of breathing. The patient is on CPAP 15 cm H₂O, and 100% FiO₂, has a respiratory rate which vacillates between 20-40 breaths per minute, has SpO₂=79-90% and crackles are heard on exam bilaterally. The patient is thought to be a challenging intubation, due to body habitus, short neck, increased facial girth, and an enlarged tongue. The patient desaturates as soon as the head of the bed is lowered.

Concerned about a difficult airway and a challenging intubation, the primary physician pages the Anesthesiologist on call for a difficult airway response. Anesthesiology arrives at bedside with the difficult airway bag, and prepares to intubate the patient.

Opportunities for Improvement

- When indicated, utilize experts in airway management to evaluate and recommend plan of care for patients with anticipated difficult airways
- Patient and situational/environmental factors can make intubation challenging
- If time allows, the operating room, rather than the bedside, may be the safest setting to perform intubations for patients with anticipated difficult airways

What You Can Do / Tools You Can Use

- An anesthesiologist can be contacted to mobilize an airway response either by calling the Anesthesia senior resident at 6-4575 or the anesthesiology attending at 6-2427(6-AGAS)
- If a surgical airway is required, the trauma surgeon on call can be reached by searching “Difficult Airway backup service pager” on WebExchange; pager 9388
- At UH East, staff may contact the attending anesthesiologist on call during daytime hours. Alternatively, an ED physician can be reached 24/7 for immediate difficult airway assistance.
- Remember the Critical Event Officer is available to help arrange needed care and services for patients 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To reach the Critical Event Officer, call 614-293-7243 (3-page) and enter pager number 9876, and enter your call back number

Action Required: Consider how this information may be applied to your area, patient populations, services provided etc. Be sure to discuss with peers/staff to raise awareness, increase understanding and potential risks, and the tools available to mitigate risks