

Foothills and Mile-High RETAC Statement on Sedation of Prehospital Patients

July 17, 2020

Who we are: The Foothills and Mile-High Regional Emergency Medical & Trauma Advisory Councils are tasked with advising on all matters related to the continuum of care in emergency medical and trauma within our 11-county region in Colorado. We represent these partners in supporting our Medical Directors and prehospital care providers in this matter.

Situational Awareness: Agitated and violent patients provide for a unique and extremely dangerous situation in the prehospital setting. EMS providers are called upon to treat these people and prevent them from harming themselves or others. In some circumstances, these patients are at risk for further harm and possibly death due to cardiovascular collapse associated with physiologic demands put on the body from psychosis, delirium, severe metabolic derangement, or drug toxicity.

Position: These types of cases are true medical emergencies. EMS personnel must have the tools that allow them to appropriately provide treatment to the patient and to prevent further harm to them, first responders, and others on-scene. Treatment may include the need for rapid sedation to prevent injury to the patient, bystanders, and those responding to provide care of that person. Physicians who have specialized in EMS oversight provide medical expertise to EMS providers utilizing evidence-based best practices to manage these situations. Our EMS medical directors provide this guidance and write protocols for how to appropriately manage these patients. This includes determining what medications are best for rapid sedation. The EMS Medical Director Physicians review these cases through a quality management system that includes review of the protocol, the care, and the system. As a group, we support the work and decisions of our EMS medical director experts that have reviewed the evidence and best practices for the treatment of people suffering from these medical emergencies.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Underbrink, Executive Director, Foothills RETAC
On behalf of the Foothills RETAC Board of Directors
Approved 7/15/2020

Shirley Terry, Executive Director, Mile-High RETAC
On behalf of the Mile-High RETAC Board of Directors
Approved 7/16/2020

Denver Metro EMS Physicians Statement on Sedation of Prehospital Patients:
July 1, 2020

The specialty of EMS medicine is dedicated to the care of patients in the prehospital environment. As EMS physicians we recognize the importance of caring for patients with mental health, delirium and drug related emergencies and treating those patients with respect and dignity. Our medical professionalism and clinical expertise have made us unified and resolute in the following principles:

Medical emergencies should be handled by medical professionals. EMS personnel often encounter people who are agitated and pose a threat to themselves and others. Paramedics must make the critical determination if this person is experiencing a medical emergency. Medical emergencies such as psychosis, delirium, severe metabolic derangement or drug toxicity that must be managed by EMS providers.

Agitated delirium can lead to a metabolic catastrophe. Severe agitation is associated with metabolic acidosis, hyperthermia, dehydration and electrolyte abnormalities which can lead to cardiovascular collapse and death. What was once thought of as solely a psychiatric or behavioral issue is now known to be a medical emergency. Early recognition and treatment of severe agitation is essential to patient safety. Safe care of these individuals requires a coordinated approach with law enforcement and includes the administration of sedating medications to minimize the time spent physically restraining patients. The safety and efficacy of medications such as midazolam and ketamine to rapidly sedate severely agitated patients are supported by the medical literature and by vast amounts of clinical experience.

The Denver Metro EMS Medical Directors are familiar with the literature and practice of managing agitated patients. We recognize and agree with the attached position paper by the EMS Eagles consortium of major metropolitan EMS medical directors. We believe that emergency medical decisions should be based on science and medical expertise.

Jonathan Apfelbaum, MD
Whitney Barrett, MD
Jeff Beckman, MD
JP Brewer, MD
Daniel Cheek, MD
Erica Douglass, MD
Aaron Eberhardt, MD
Gene Eby, MD
Eric Hill, MD
Julie Krell Hall, MD
Dylan Luyten, MD
Kevin McVaney, MD
Derrick Morford, DO

Thomas Paluska, MD
Gilbert Pineda, MD
Lara Rappaport, MD
John Riccio, MD
David Richter, DO
Jason Roosa, MD
Clark Samuel Smith, MD
Fred Severyn, MD
Gina Soriya, MD
Pete Vellman, MD
Daniel Willner, MD
Angela Wright, MD

Concerns have been expressed recently regarding the administration of medications – including ketamine – by emergency medical services (EMS) providers to sedate delirious and often violent patients in the prehospital environment.

Safety is the primary driver for the use of sedative or calming medications. Patients who are violent due to psychiatric disorders and/or substance use often lose the ability to respond to verbal calming techniques. As a result, they present a significant health and safety risk to themselves and to those around them. Death may result from severe metabolic abnormalities that are worsened by uncontrolled agitation.

Emergency medical services (EMS) physician medical directors across the United States implement protocols that paramedics use to care for their patients. These may include guidelines for the management of violent patient situations that address stepwise implementation of verbal calming and de-escalation techniques, followed by physical containment and/or sedation. The goal is to safeguard the patients, while also reducing the risk of violence directed against EMS and public safety workers.

Coordination with law enforcement is critical to the safe management of violent patients. This partnership between EMS and law enforcement is intentional and is the result of a national effort to decrease the risk of in-custody death. Appropriate uses of physical containment and restraints as well as sedation with calming agents are critical tools for the safety of both the patients and the responders who are called to care for them. Law enforcement officers are typically the most highly trained individuals to safely physically subdue violent people and are most qualified for initial management. The use of medications is, however, solely the decision and responsibility of EMS. Allowing delirious or agitated patients to continue to struggle against physical restraints is medically dangerous, ethically unacceptable, and increases the risk of injury or death. Almost all people in this condition require monitoring and transport by EMS to an emergency department for further evaluation. They are clearly medical patients until their condition is diagnosed, treated, and stabilized.

A variety of medications are currently considered appropriate options for sedation in this setting. These medications are widely used throughout the country and are included in the National Model EMS Clinical Guidelines. Ketamine has gained recent favor in many EMS systems due to its safety profile in patients with violence resulting from psychiatric and/or drug-related influences. Numerous EMS systems have extensive experience that supports the ability of EMS to safely administer ketamine in this difficult patient population.

We, the undersigned EMS Medical Directors, strongly support the use of medications to calm delirious and/or violent patients who are a danger to themselves or others. We endorse the use of appropriate sedative medications, including ketamine, when administered by well-trained paramedics who are functioning under carefully designed medical care protocols. Patients and EMS workers are safer as a result.

Peter Antevy MD - Broward County FL, Palm Beach County FL

Glenn Asaeda, MD – New York City

Sabina Braithwaite, MD - Saint Louis

E. Stein Bronsky, MD - Colorado Springs
Charles Burnell, MD - Acadian Ambulance Service, Inc.
Jose G Cabanas, MD – Raleigh
Elizabeth Char MD - Hawaii
Brian Clemency DO - Western New York
M. Riccardo Colella, DO – Milwaukee
Thomas E. Collins MD – Cleveland
Christopher B. Colwell, MD – San Francisco
Robert B Dunne MD - Detroit Craig
Ellis, MD – New Zealand
Mark E. Escott, MD – Austin
David French, MD – Charleston
Ray Fowler, MD – Dallas
John M Gallagher, MD - Wichita
John V. Gallagher, MD - Phoenix
Marc Gautreau, MD – San Jose
William S. Gilmore, MD – St Louis
Jeffrey M. Goodloe, MD, Oklahoma City & Tulsa
Drew Harrell, MD - Albuquerque
Joe Holley, MD – Memphis
Jon Jui, MD - Portland
Emily Kidd, MD - Acadian Ambulance Service, Inc.
Michael Levy MD - Anchorage
Donald Locasto, MD – Cincinnati Chuck
Mason, MD – Little Rock
Craig Manifold, DO - South Texas
Kevin McVaney, MD - Denver
Crawford Mechem, MD – Philadelphia
David A. Miramontes MD - San Antonio
Dan O’Donnell, MD - Indianapolis
Stefan Poloczek MD, Berlin
Neal J. Richmond, MD - Fort Worth/Tarrant County
Ronald Roth, MD – Pittsburgh
Michael R. Sayre, MD – Seattle
Kenneth A Schepke, MD – Palm Beach County
David E. Slattery, MD - Las Vegas
Corey Slovis, MD – Nashville
Terence D Valenzuela, MD – Tucson
Veer Vithalani, MD - Fort Worth
Arthur H Yancey II, MD – Atlanta
Scott Youngquist, MD Salt Lake City