

Facial burns in connection with oxygen insufflation in home-based palliative care

M. Thöns¹, M. Zenz²

¹Praxis für Palliativmedizin, Bochum,

²Klinik für Anaesthesiologie, Intensiv-, Palliativ- und Schmerzmedizin,
BG-Universitätsklinikum Bergmannsheil, Bochum

Case Report

We report about a 48 year old patient receiving specialized out-patient palliative care with diagnosis of SCBC. He was suffering from pain and repetitive dyspnoea. It had been possible to secure reasonable symptom relief by treating him with morphine and lorazepam over a long period. At oxygen saturation of 93-98 % an oncologist prescribed an oxygen concentrator. Despite detailed information about the risks, given by a palliative doctor, the patient smoked while inhaling O₂, which caused a sudden flame to burn the right side of his face causing second degree burns (picture 1).



Picture 1: Acute burns

Picture 2: After treatment

Making use of the mobile phone service MMS we were given advice by the centre for serious burn injuries and were able to continue treatment at home. Despite secondary infection the burns healed within four weeks without leaving scars using Fusidin acid ointment (picture 2).

Discussion

While the use of oxygen in emergency cases is valued highly, its use for palliative care is increasingly being questioned. It is undisputed that a patient can experience physiologically justified relief of dyspnoea if oxygen saturation in his blood is reduced (SO₂ < 92 %). In most cases dyspnoea is caused by too hypercapnia. Giving oxygen can only - if at all - help psychologically. The disadvantages are not to be ignored; these can be dependency on medical technology (tube, oxygen concentrator), drying up of the mucous membrane, irritation caused by noise, and disturbed communication due to facial masks. Recently it was shown that dyspnoea can be treated much more successfully by the application of benzodiazepines or opioids.

Conclusion

The application of oxygen for the treatment of dyspnoea rarely makes sense and, as in the cited case of nicotine abuse, it can cause severe facial burns. In the case of care at home advice from a burns specialist can be obtained by means of new technical facilities (mobile phone - MMS). It should be compulsory to put a large warning sign on oxygen concentrators "No Smoking".