

Chapter 9

Empathy in the Operating Room: Understanding Autism in Surgical Care

Marios Papadakis

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9020-874X>

Witten Herdecke University, Germany

ABSTRACT

Managing surgical care for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demands tailored strategies addressing unique behavioral, sensory, and communication challenges. Preoperative preparation includes individualized care plans, familiarization with hospital environments, alternative communication methods, and caregiver collaboration. Intraoperative strategies focus on minimizing invasive devices and adapting anesthesia protocols to reduce distress. Postoperative care emphasizes effective pain management, sensory modifications, and caregiver involvement to support recovery. By fostering empathy and understanding among healthcare providers, these approaches enhance surgical outcomes, reduce anxiety, and improve care quality for patients with ASD. This multidisciplinary framework addresses gaps in current practices, ensuring a patient-centered, empathetic approach to perioperative care.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by ongoing challenges in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted and repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. Current estimates indicate that 1

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in 59 children born today will be diagnosed with ASD. Managing surgical care for patients with ASD is particularly challenging due to difficulties in communication, heightened sensory sensitivities, and elevated anxiety levels. Unlike the extensive body of literature available in medicine, psychology, and nursing, there is a scarcity of research focused on the unique surgical challenges associated with ASD. Existing literature predominantly highlights issues with 'combative' or 'uncooperative' patients rather than addressing the underlying causes of these behaviors (Koski 2016). Additionally, the literature on perioperative care for individuals with ASD has been largely dominated by discussions on anesthesia, specifically the evaluation of various sedation methods. This underscores the growing need for research centered on behaviorally informed approaches to surgical interventions. This manuscript aims to bridge this gap by reviewing the current literature and offering strategies to enhance the surgical experience for this growing patient population (Selvey 2019). Furthermore, families often express significant anxiety when bringing their child with ASD into healthcare settings, primarily due to rigid systems, past traumatic experiences, and a lack of adequate understanding of ASD among healthcare providers (Palmer 2023).

Preoperative Assessment

Effective preoperative management of surgical patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is vital for achieving the best possible outcomes. This process requires thorough preoperative assessments, the development of individualized care plans, and close collaboration among multidisciplinary teams.

Individualized preoperative planning is essential for optimizing surgical care. Hudson's classification system is considered to be more effective in identifying patient abilities and needs than relying solely on age or parental descriptions (Hudson 2006).^a

Preoperative non-pharmacological strategies

- ***Understanding the patient's needs:*** Healthcare providers must have a comprehensive understanding of each patient's specific needs and triggers. This knowledge is crucial for tailoring care to ensure the best possible outcomes for patients with ASD (Koski 2016). To achieve this, providers can:
 - ***Involve the patient's parents:*** Parents are invaluable resources in preparing a patient with ASD for a medical encounter. They offer unique insights into the child's preferences, behaviors, and effective strategies that have been used at home or school, such as role modeling, imitation, distraction, and reward systems. This involvement is essential since ev-

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