September 22, 2016

TO: Medical Control Authorities
EMS Agencies
EMS Personnel

FROM: Kathy Wahl, Director Division of EMS and Trauma

SUBJECT: Ammonia Inhalants

This memo is in response to a question requesting an opinion of the QA Task Force on the use of ammonia inhalants. For several reasons which will be outlined below, it is the opinion of MDHHS, Division of EMS and Trauma leadership and the Quality Assurance Task Force, that the use of ammonia inhalants is prohibited.

- The use of ammonia inhalants has been considered punitive and/or harmful in many instances.
- There is no approved use for ammonia inhalants to treat a medical condition. Patients suffering from head injuries, shock or strokes may also withdraw from the noxious stimulus.
- Ammonia can worsen pre-existing respiratory conditions.
- “There are other hazards associated…The violent physical response to ammonia may compromise the integrity of the spinal canal in patients with potential cord injury. The wild and forceful motions of the extremities may also pose challenges to patient and caregiver safety…Ammonia use may also produce coughing, nausea and vomiting which can increase the risk of aspiration in patients with an impaired gag reflex.” (JEMS, 2004)
- Regardless of the reason a patient may be “pretending” to be unconscious, there is generally a medical or behavioral health reason, and all patients deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. (Bledsoe, 2008)
- Ammonia can be harmful and in some cases fatal. It is not an innocuous agent. (Bledsoe, 2008)
- There is no indication for the use of ammonia inhalants in either the State of Michigan protocols or the National Model EMS Clinical Guidelines. (National Association of State EMS Officials, 2014)

In summary, as care providers, it is the role of EMS providers to treat all patients in a non-judgmental manner and to follow the rule of, “first do no harm.” Ammonia inhalants are not included in the list of approved supplies or protocols for EMS and therefore should not be carried by EMS agencies or personnel.

References

