

## Administration of Nembutal

### Introduction

It is very straight forward to take Nembutal for the purpose of a peaceful and reliable death. This is one of the reasons that it is Nembutal that is the drug of choice in places where assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia are lawful.

### Things to Consider

#### *Powder Nembutal makes a clear liquid*

When a person decides to die, 10 or more gm of powdered Nembutal is placed in a glass, and then about 50ml of cold water is added. The powder should be stirred until it is fully dissolved. The liquid in the glass will be clear.

#### *Breaking the seal of Liquid Nembutal*

In the case of veterinary liquid, the bottle is opened by breaking the seal and pouring all the contents (100ml) into a clean glass.

Note, these bottles are tightly sealed and the liquid inside is sterile. Breaking the seal can sometimes be difficult especially if vision is poor, or if you have arthritis in your hands. One method of opening the bottle is shown in the accompanying video ‘Opening a bottle of Nembutal’ (in this Chapter).

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Fig 19.1: The bottle of Nembutal & plastic cup as used at Dr John Elliott's assisted death at Dignitas in 2007

### ***Anti-emetics***

In places where assisted dying is legal, Nembutal is invariably taken with a separate anti-emetic (anti-vomiting) drug. The anti-emetic will be taken as stipulated either for two days prior to the chosen night. Alternatively it can be taken as a single 'stat dose' around 40 minutes before the Nembutal is to be taken (see Chapter 9 for more explanation).

### ***Eating something light***

Have something light to eat so your stomach is not empty is generally considered a good idea. The chance of reflex vomiting brought on by drinking the bitter Nembutal liquid is reduced if there is something in the stomach. This should not be a significant meal that will slow the absorption of the drug. Something light is preferable, like tea and toast, an hour or so before taking the drug.

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### ***A Safe Environment***

An important consideration will be a peaceful, safe environment where one will not be disturbed. Usually this is best achieved at night.

### ***Drinking Alcohol after the Nembutal***

The liquid in the glass can be drunk quickly in 2 or 3 swallows, and then followed by some alcohol, usually spirits or liqueur. Although not essential, alcohol is recommended as it alleviates the bitter Nembutal after-taste, and will speed the drug's action.

### ***Mixing Nembutal with Something Else to take away the Bitter Taste***

It is always better to take one's Nembutal straight. The likely result of mixing the Nembutal with something else (eg. yogurt) is the creation of a greater volume of an equally unpalatable substance. Furthermore, using a spoon to consume the drug, rather than drinking it, can mean a longer time to ingest the 100ml.

Exit has received reports of people falling asleep before all of the drug is consumed. This is dangerous. It is best to drink the 100ml in a few swallows, then drink alcohol.

### ***How the Nembutal Takes Effect***

The drug is absorbed from the stomach, and as the level in the blood rises, some crosses the blood-brain barrier and effects the part of the brain that controls sleep.

Within a few minutes of taking the drink the person falls into a deep sleep, quite often in mid-sentence when talking to family and friends!

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As the level of drug in the bloodstream rises, more moves into the brain and sleep becomes deeper and deeper. At this point, another area of the brain is effected; that which controls the rate of breathing. The person's breathing slows, and eventually stops altogether.

With no oxygen entering the lungs, the person dies of 'respiratory arrest', where there is not enough oxygen in the circulating blood to maintain brain function. Lastly, the heart stops beating. Rarely is there any bladder or bowel motion.

It is the most peaceful of deaths to witness. With Nembutal, you always die in your sleep.

### *A Lethal Dose of Nembutal*

While there are several florid accounts of failure by people taking a full 100ml bottle of veterinary Nembutal, closer scrutiny shows a much more complex situation. Exit has examined the details and medical records of several such cases.

In the vast majority of cases, one bottle (100ml @ 60mg/ml) of veterinary Nembutal will always be satisfactory and lead to a peaceful death, usually in ~1 - 2 hours. However, there is a small group (estimated at <1%) who may exhibit a prolonged comatose phase before death (sometimes up to 24 hours). Outright 'failures' remain extremely rare. Indeed, all of the reported failures investigated by Exit were associated with early discovery and subsequent medical intervention. This emphasizes the need for careful selection of the place of death.

In some of the analyzed cases, the long comatose phase was associated with the prolonged use of anti-psychotic medication or chronic heavy alcohol use, prior to taking the barbiturate. It is presumed the induction of liver enzymes by these drugs

causes increased degradation of the Nembutal, lowering the concentration in the brain. In these situations, increasing the quantity of drug taken (eg. to 2 bottles, 12gm) may not necessarily hasten the death.

Exit has examined the use of several potentiating drugs which may be dissolved into the liquid Nembutal, removing any possibility of extended coma. The most useful, Dilantin, (phenytoin sodium) is discussed in this Chapter.

### **Available Forms of Nembutal**

As discussed in the previous Chapter, Nembutal is available as both a liquid and a powder. Reagent-grade sodium pentobarbital powder is available from Chinese manufacturers (Fig 19.4)

Sterile, veterinary liquid is most often found in South America. For over a decade, this form of Nembutal has been the most common form used for a peaceful death. (Fig 19.2). Very occasionally, pharmaceutical-grade Nembutal tablets or capsules, originally prescribed as sleeping medication, are obtained although this is uncommon. (Fig 19.3)

Reagent-grade Nembutal is marketed as a white crystalline powder which readily absorbs moisture and is very soluble in water. It is non-sterile and often packaged in small, sealed screw-top plastic containers or loose in plastic sachets. Most people ordering the drug from China (see the previous Chapter) receive 25gm as flat-packed loose powder or in screw-top containers (see Fig 19.4). Note that 25gm is more than enough of the drug to provide a peaceful death for 2 - 3 people.

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Fig 19.2: Sealed veterinary Nembutal



Fig 19.3: Pharmaceutical Nembutal tablets



Fig 19.4: 2 x 12.5gm screw top containers of Chinese powdered sodium pentobarbitol

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In contrast, the veterinary liquid form of the drug is designed for intravenous administration in animals to provide anaesthesia for surgery. It is marketed as a sterile clear liquid with a concentration of 60 mg/ml of sodium pentobarbital in alkaline buffered solution with 10% ethyl (or methyl) alcohol and ethylene glycol. The usual packaging is a glass 100ml bottle (clear or tinted glass), sealed with a rubber stopper and metal seal.

Pharmaceutical-grade Nembutal tablets or capsules are normally supplied in a screw top plastic container, showing a date of manufacture of more than 20 years ago, usually long past their expiry date.

### **Interaction with Other Drugs**

Those who take Nembutal for a peaceful death are often taking other drugs due to their illness. When approaching the chosen day to take the Nembutal, an often-asked question is whether any inter-current medications should cease.

There are only a few drugs that are known to interfere with the action of Nembutal. There is generally no need to cease taking other drugs in the preceding days. Nevertheless, it is common practice for those planning their death to cease all but the essential medication in the week before their planned exit.

Chronic heavy alcohol use, for example, can lead to cross-tolerance and may impair the action of the barbiturate. In rare cases, taking another barbiturate, such as the anti-convulsant phenobarb, can lead to the development of a barbiturate-tolerance. In these cases, a larger dose of the Nembutal (12gm powder or 2 x 100ml bottles) would be advised.

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Some drugs enhance the effect of the Nembutal and can even be employed for that specific purpose. An example is the anti-convulsant Dilantin (phenytoin sodium Fig 19.5).

Dilantin is useful as the drug dissolves in water forming an alkali solution which is compatible with the liquid Nembutal. Nembutal of uncertain quality can have its potency enhanced by dissolving 1- 2gm of phenytoin sodium in the solution before drinking. This process is shown in the accompanying video ‘Making Nembutal even more effective’. Although Dilantin is a drug that is usually only available on prescription, it is relatively easily obtained through Internet mailing sources. It is not a drug of interest to the authorities.



Fig 19.5: Dilantin 100mg capsules

## **Other Useful Barbiturates**

Two other barbiturates that still find wide (although decreasing) use in medicine can also be usefully employed for a peaceful death. These are the anti-convulsant Phenobarbital, and the anaesthetic induction agent, Pentothal.

## **Phenobarbital**

As discussed in earlier, *Phenobarbital* and *Pentobarbital* are drugs that are often confused because of the similarity of their names. Although both are barbiturates, pentobarbital sodium (Nembutal) is the fast-acting soluble salt. This is the euthanasia drug of choice in all countries that allow assisted suicide



and voluntary euthanasia. Phenobarb is a different drug. In its usual form, phenobarb is a slow-acting anti-convulsant, prescribed when there is a risk of convulsions (eg. brain trauma etc).

Some people will have access to phenobarb, either from their own doctor or from overseas pharmaceutical suppliers. A drink of 10gm (~ 250 of the white 30mg tablets shown in Fig 19.6) crushed and mixed with water will be lethal.



Fig 19.6: 30mg tablets of Phenobarbitone

Note: There is no rapid loss of consciousness, as in the case of Nembutal. The time to death using phenobarbitone can be several hours. If one is found before death, resuscitation is very possible.

Phenobarb can, however, be made more effective by raising the pH of the solution of the crushed tablets. This is done using Sodium Carbonate to convert the Phenobarbital to the more readily-absorbed sodium phenobarbital. If available, 1gm of Dilantin can be added to this drink with good effect.

To reduce the time from taking the drink to loss of consciousness, a second drink made from a benzodiazepam sleeping drug is recommended (eg, Serapax, oxazepam or Mogadon, nitrazepam). Again, alcohol can be an effective supplement.

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### **Pentothal (thiopentone sodium)**

For many years, Pentothal was the main intravenous induction agent used in anaesthesia. Its use has declined in recent years. When given intravenously, most patients are asked by the anesthetist to count back from 10. Few get past 7 before consciousness is lost.

Note: This is the primary drug used in lethal injections in executions in the US. In November 2010, a worldwide shortage of the drug prompted the state of Oklahoma to investigate using Nembutal as an alternative.

See: <http://abcn.ws/dPu2Zr>

Pentothal is marketed as soluble thiopentone sodium powder in sterile ampoules. These are designed to be mixed with sterile water before being administered intravenously. The powder can be dissolved in water and taken orally with rapid effect. 10gm of the drug (the contents of 20 ampoules) dissolves rapidly in ~50ml of water, and if drunk leads to rapid loss of consciousness and death. Alcohol is a useful supplement.

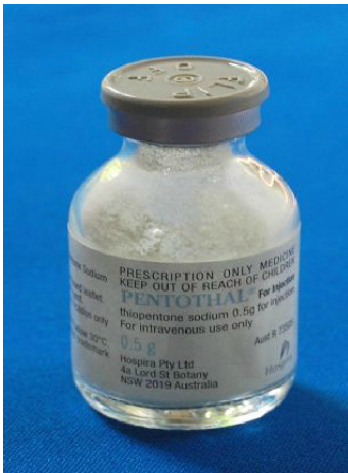


Fig 19.7: 500mg ampoule of dry Pentothal

Exit has tested the vacuum-packing of 10gm of dry sodium pentothal powder mixed with 1gm of phenytoin sodium. This can be easily transported and stored. Reconstitution is then carried out by breaking the vacuum seal and dissolving the sachet of powder in ~50ml of water before drinking.

## **Conclusion**

When rigorous scientific processes are used to establish the purity and efficacy of known drugs, ensuring a reliable and peaceful death, the need for legislative change is significantly diminished. This is because the act of dying well and at a time and place of one's choosing is achievable. However, certain steps must be taken.

When Nembutal has been sourced by the person themselves and then tested and verified by the person themselves, with a view to being taken by the person themselves, there is little role for the medical profession. Whether or not legislation exists also ceases to be of less importance. When the time is right, they will simply go to the cupboard!