

## THE FIRST ADMINISTRATION OF ETHER

### Centenary Commemoration at University College Hospital

On Dec. 21, 1846, at University College Hospital, London, the first public operation under an anaesthetic to be performed in Europe was carried out by Robert Liston. The patient was a Harley Street butler, aged 36, who came for amputation of the right leg above the knee. At 2.25 on that day he was brought into the operating theatre; he breathed ether vapour for between two and three minutes, and the effect was such as to cause complete insensibility to pain, although consciousness was retained and questions were answered. Liston performed the complete operation in less than half a minute, during which not the slightest groan was heard from the patient nor was his countenance at all expressive of pain.

To commemorate this event a gathering took place at University College Hospital on Dec. 21, 1946, at which Dr. MASSEY DAWKINS gave a short address. The original operating table with the holes through which the straps were drawn to restrain patients in pre-anaesthetic days, a model of the original inhaler, and various contemporary sketches and portraits were exhibited, and a copy of the case notes of this successful amputation was handed to every visitor.

Dr. Dawkins said that an attempt had recently been made by Scotch friends to claim for a hospital in the North the honour of the first ether administration in the Old World, but the evidence was scanty (*Journal*, Oct. 26, p. 621), and the occasion was not in any sense a public one. Some idea might be obtained from Sir Rickman Godlee's biography of Lister of the state of pre-anaesthetic surgery at University College Hospital. The three senior surgeons operated only on Wednesday afternoons, and with such celerity that that time was sufficient for all the operations of the week, apart from emergencies. Patients requiring amputations were asked at the doors of the theatre whether they would have their leg off or not, and if they said "Yes" no heed was taken of any subsequent change of mind. Patients at first frequently refused to face the ordeal, then became resigned, only, many of them, to engage in a useless resistance at the last moment.

In October, 1846, the discovery of ether anaesthesia was announced in America. Liston witnessed its demonstration at the Royal Medico-Chirurgical Society, where Matthew Duncan was a volunteer. Liston was a surgeon of great skill and of forceful character, with remarkable dexterity in the use of cutting instruments. The operating theatre in which he worked was a semicircular apartment, about 40 ft. (12 m.) across, with sharply rising tiers of seats for the students. It contained a small basin, about the size of a soup plate, in which the surgeons washed their hands—sometimes even before the operation—and there were pegs from which hung the blood-stained frock-coats of the staff. Actually the first English operation performed under ether anaesthesia was a dental extraction carried out by Mr. Robinson, a dentist of Gower Street.

Liston's theatre had a noteworthy company, including Sir Russell Reynolds, Sir John Erichsen, and the future Lord Lister. Liston gave a short address describing the American discovery and the advantages to be hoped for, added a word about the weak condition of the patient, and appealed for quietness and consideration. The patient was brought in with a handkerchief covering his face. Ether induction took place quietly, and in twenty-six seconds the limb was off. The patient, rising as from ordinary sleep, then said, "Take me away. I cannot have it off. I must die as I am," and could hardly believe when it was proved to him that the limb was already amputated. He went on without interruption to a good recovery and was discharged from the hospital on the following Feb. 11. Sir John Forbes, one of the spectators, said that he never felt so near to falling on the floor in his life as he did when he witnessed the operation. Everybody was pale and silent, except Liston himself, who was flushed and excited, and could scarcely command himself to speak. When, after it was over, he broke the silence and said, "Gentlemen," he almost choked. According to Sir Russell Reynolds's account he said, before starting, "Gentlemen, we are going to try a Yankee dodge for making men insensible. This man's leg has to come off above the knee, and my friend Mr. Squire

is going to give the ether so that the man will not feel it." The ether in those days was not as pure nor the apparatus as handy as now, so perhaps Liston was a little impatient to get on with his work. When Squire said he was ready, Liston's knife flashed in the air. "I took out my watch," said Reynolds, "and the leg was on the floor in twenty-six seconds." Liston turned to the company, "This Yankee dodge beats mesmerism hollow."

There was a curious incident of a student (or by some accounts a hospital porter) named Sheldrake, a man of powerful build, who volunteered to be anaesthetized in the theatre, but after half a minute's administration sprang from the table, felled the anaesthetist with a blow, swept aside the assistants, and tore up the gangway, scattering the students like sheep. The second patient on whom an operation was done under anaesthesia was an out-patient whose toenail was removed. On the same night, in a letter to a friend, Liston began with the words of St. Paul, "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice." At dinner that evening he insisted on anaesthetizing his assistant. The assistant said afterwards that when he was about half under he heard one of the ladies say, "Mr. Liston, for God's sake, stop; you will be the death of this young man." He did stop, but the assistant felt the pressure of Liston's hands on the lobes of his ears for a day or two.

The lay press took no account of this historic happening until Christmas Day, when it was mentioned in the *Daily News*, sandwiched between paragraphs about the lateness of the Birmingham mail and a fracas of bedmakers and students at Cambridge. The *Times* did not notice it until Jan. 4, 1847. The change in surgery consequent upon the introduction of anaesthesia was a very gradual one. No striking new operations were introduced, no new fields opened up, operations were still performed at breathless speed, and students still saw the surgery of pre-anaesthetic days, robbed only of its most shocking feature, that of the pain inflicted. But the records of University College Hospital showed no cases of excision of the knee between 1830 and 1850, while in the next four years there were twenty-one cases. Ether was still the safest anaesthetic for general use, and despite the advances in other forms of anaesthesia the average yearly consumption of ether was now more than half a ton at each of the large London hospitals.

Dr. E. A. BARTON, whose father, then twenty-two years of age, was at University College Hospital and present on the occasion, added a few words. He recalled the smallness of the old theatre, how the students in their tiered seats looked down upon the patients. His father had told him that in the pre-anaesthetic days the one part of their training which the students could not stand was the surgery course, which was made dreadful by the shrieks and screams coming from the operating theatre and echoing through the hospital. The wooden table on which the operations were done had been rescued from a lumber room and was now a treasured museum piece at the hospital.

### HEALTH ADMINISTRATION IN THE CITY OF LONDON

The development of health services in the City of London was the subject of interesting speeches at a luncheon of the Corporation health committee on Dec. 19, when a presentation was made to Sir George Elliston on the completion of his third term of office as chairman of the committee.

Sir ALLEN DALEY, President of the Society of Medical Officers of Health, pointed out that the Corporation had been issuing sanitary regulations as far back as 1281 and had continued to develop their health services from that time onwards. But the outstanding event in the health history of the city had been the appointment by the Corporation in 1848 of Sir John Simon as their first medical officer of health. For once London had to yield pride of place to Liverpool, who had appointed the first of all medical officers of health the previous year.

From Simon onwards the City could be relied upon to pick winners for its chief health officers. After seven years' service with the Corporation, Simon had become successively medical officer for the Central Board of Health and for the Privy Council, and the first medical officer of the Local Government Board. He had therefore been the first in line of the seven medical officers who had filled the City post now held with