The First Use of Ether Anaesthesia in India -- A Plea for More Information

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The First use of Ether Anaesthesia in India
– A Plea for More Information

To,
The Editor, IJA
Madam,

Most anaesthetists are aware of events that led to
the introduction of modern anaesthesia after the public
demonstration of ether anaesthesia on October 16, 1846 at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), Boston, USA.\textsuperscript{1,2}

News about the efficacy of ether spread rapidly,
and it was soon adopted into surgical practice in North
America, Europe, Asia, and the rest of the world. The
first ether anaesthetic in India is reported to have been
administered, within 6 months, on March 22, 1847, at
the Medical College Hospital, Calcutta.\textsuperscript{3} This is remark-
able considering that telegraphy had not yet been in-
troduced, and the primary means of transportation and
communication between England and India was by sea.
The use of ether anaesthesia in India preceded its in-
troduction in South Africa, Rhodesia, Australia, China,
and Japan. Ether was used in London during an opera-
tion by Robert Liston on December 21, 1846.

Almost half a century after the event, Robert Cutler
Hinckley, the son of a wealthy Boston merchant cre-
ated a classic oil painting (\textit{The First Operation with Ether}). The painting was completed as part of his
graduation requirements at an Arts school in Paris. Af-
fter many unsuccessful attempts to sell his work, a frus-
trated Hinckley was about to destroy the painting when
a kindly curator convinced him to donate it to the Bos-
ton Medical Library. It is currently on display at Francis
A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical
School, Boston, Massachusetts. In a strange turn of
events, this painting has become one of the most fa-
mous works of art depicting medical events. In 2001,
a few years after the 150\textsuperscript{th} celebration of the introd-
cution of ether anaesthesia, MGH unveiled another paint-
ing (\textit{Ether Day, 1846}) depicting the same event.\textsuperscript{4}

Morton’s ether demonstration received prominent
coverage in newspapers, medical journals, biographi-
cal works, novels, and in works of art. Moreover, ar-
ticles about both paintings too have appeared in news-
papers, magazines, and medical journals. In addition, a
scholarly book has been written about Hinckley’s mas-
terpiece.

Compared to the amount of information available
about the anaesthetic of October 16, 1846, very little
is known about the first use of ether as an anaesthetic
in India. Published articles do not provide references
to document their claim. Interestingly, a newspaper re-
port suggests that anaesthesia may have been used ear-
lier than March 11, 1847, at Madras General Hospital.
In any case, we only know the last name of the sur-
geon in Calcutta (O’Shaughnessy), and nothing about
the anaesthetist, the patient, the surgical procedure, the
equipment, and the individuals who participated in the introduction of modern anaesthesia to India. Since much of medicine in mid 19th century India was controlled by the British, a fair amount of useful information resides in Britain. In addition, many local sources in India have not been digitized to enable electronic access. We humbly solicit specific details from anyone about the first use of ether in India, be it in Calcutta, Madras, or elsewhere – about the date, location, institution, anaesthetist, surgeon, procedure, and any other significant information.

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