

History of Canadian Anaesthesia

Dr. E.D. Worthington (1820-1895) - An early Quebec Anaesthetist



Although it is impossible to say with any certainty who gave the first ether anaesthetic in Lower Canada (Quebec), it is well documented that Dr. James Douglas in Quebec city, Dr. Horace Nelson of Montreal, and Dr. E.D. Worthington of Sherbrooke had all independently and more or less simultaneously reported the successful administration of ether anaesthesia.

The story of Dr. Worthington's life is like a Boy's Own Annual adventure tale, luckily he, unlike so many of his contemporaries, was a prolific writer, some of whose essays were collected after his death into a small book entitled "Reminiscences (sic) of Student Life and Practice."

He was born in Ireland, in Ballinahill, on December 1, 1820, and at the age of two came with his parents to Quebec City. There were no medical schools in Canada so that in 1834 Dr. Worthington was indentured for seven years with Dr. James Douglas of Quebec City (who was the first person to give ether anaesthesia in that city).

At that time the apprentice students lived in the house of their mentor and their anatomical dissections were done in the house. Dr. Worthington describes his participation in grave digging to obtain dissection specimens. His apprenticeship was reduced to five years in order that he could accept an appointment as assistant surgeon to H.M. 56th Foot, and subsequently to H.M. 68th Light Infantry. His interest and involvement with the army began in 1837 when he served as a private in the Quebec regiment of Volunteer Light Infantry. He also saw active service in a professional capacity in both Fenian raids. In 1842 Worthington temporarily resigned his army commission, and went to Edinburgh. He received a Doctorate in Medicine from St. Andrew's and licentiates from Glasgow and finally from Edinburgh, who were initially reluctant to give him a licentiate because of his poor knowledge of Latin! He returned to Canada in 1843 and received the license of the Montreal Medical Board. Almost immediately he located in Sherbrooke, east of Montreal, and practised there for over half a century.

He received the M.A. from the University of Bishop's College and, in 1868, the C.M.M.D. from McGill

University. For some years he was one of the Governors of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Lower Canada and helped instigate the organization of the Canadian Medical Association.

He thought that he had performed the first capital operations under ether (March 14, 1847) and chloroform (January 24, 1848) in Canada and it seems from his descriptions that he was both surgeon and anaesthetist. The descriptions of his anaesthetics are clear and succinct. They are remarkable for his appreciation of the need of a valve system to prevent re-breathing, and for his awareness of the side-effects of the drugs he was using. It is interesting that he did not always produce unconsciousness in his patients, but rather a "twilight" state with insensibility to pain combined with a retained ability to respond to commands. He gave a hair-raising description (literally) of an ether conflagration during the course of an anaesthetic – probably one of the earliest recorded descriptions of this complication.

Dr. Worthington was the first to use chloroform in Canada. On January 24, 1848 he anaesthetized a lady for the reduction of a dislocated hip. This anaesthetic was only partially successful, but on the following day he anaesthetized a child, with complete success, for removal of a tumour from the hand. Dr. Worthington's medicine was not all practised in an urban environment. Many times he travelled 30 miles on horseback, to operate (and anaesthetize) in a log cabin. From the outset, Dr. Worthington appreciated the value of anaesthesia. His popularity and reputation for humaneness were due not only to his personal qualities but also to his use of anaesthesia for surgical procedures. Although a surgeon by training and inclination, he could also truly be called a pioneer anaesthetist. At his death on February 25, 1895 "The Medical Age" wrote:

His whole life was intimately interwoven with the medical history of Canada, and was an integral part of the history of the Province of Quebec. It is the lot of few men to be so noble, so distinguished, so loved, and so missed.

A.J. Holland MB FFARCS, Winnipeg