

Lest We Forget...

By Peter J. Cohen, M.D.

Thoughts from the Past as We Enter This New Year

Dr. Cohen currently is an Adjunct Professor of Law at the Georgetown University Law Center, where he teaches and writes on drug abuse and the law. He serves as Chair of the Physicians Health Program for the District of Columbia Medical Society. After leaving the world of chairmanships of several prestigious departments of anesthesiology, he acquired a J.D. degree at the Georgetown University Law Center. He then worked at the National Institute on Drug Abuse in healthcare policy. Dr. Cohen wrote this editorial in the journal *Anaesthesia* (1980:35,834-846) while on sabbatical in England to conduct research on mitochondrial respiration with John Nunn, one of the most eminent and erudite anesthesiologists of his time.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven ... A time to kill, and a time to heal.

Ecclesiastes iii, 1-3

It happened only 134 years ago: word of the first successful demonstration of diethyl ether spread rapidly from Boston across the Atlantic and the pain of the knife was no more.

This month, the Annual Meeting of the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland will be joined by colleagues from the United States. A few days later, anaesthetists from many lands will gather to renew friendships and exchange the results of research at the Seventh World Congress of Anesthesiologists. At this time, it is appropriate to think upon the birth of our specialty as it might relate to the current human condition.

The introduction of general anaesthesia was far more than a simple evolution of past techniques and knowledge. One need only examine terrifying descriptions of surgery prior to 1846 to realise what a magnificent and revolutionary alteration in man's outlook was accomplished that year. Although feeble and incomplete efforts had surely been attempted for years, it was inconceivable to many that the complete alleviation of the agonies of operation could ever be accomplished. In anaesthesia there was a conceptual change—not a cure for a specific disease, but a principle making many cures possible. Suddenly pain was no longer “natural.” Inviolable, immutable, and sacrosanct functions of the human organism—circu-

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lation, respiration, consciousness—had been invaded successfully. Medicine would no longer be the same.

As we learn of the continual development and enrichment of our specialty, we may take just pride in being called anaesthetists. Whether our motto be *In somno securitas* or *Vigilance*, we are united in the alleviation of pain in body and mind.

Unhappily at this time in history, while the individual has been freed from suffering during surgical operations, there is agony for the human race. Poverty, starvation, pestilence, ignorance, superstition, failure of communication are still with us, as is their inevitable consequence—war. Far too often we are more concerned with undoing past injustice than with the conquest of present distress or provision for the future survival of humankind. Incomplete efforts to ameliorate this global pain have been made for years. Yet, as with yesterday's surgical agony, it is inconceivable to many that there ever will be success. Perhaps, again, only a revolutionary change in man's outlook will be fruitful. Is it now time to discard the inviolable, immutable, and sacrosanct concepts of a narrow and self-centered primacy of tribe, state, race, class? Might these percepts, so essential to our past history, now be outmoded or even lethal? Should we no longer think in terms of "we" and "they" but unite under "ours"? Many will believe this to be simplistic and naïve. Yet, we cannot help but wonder whether this conceptual change is the only way to save our species and world.

Committee Appointments

Active and Resident members who are interested in becoming more involved in the CSA and would like to start by serving on a committee need to contact Linda J. Mason, M.D., President-Elect, by e-mail to lrnason@som.llu.edu or the CSA: office by phone (800) 345-3691, or e-mail csa@calsocanes.com by February 1, 2003, indicating their interests in the following committees:

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