

Milestones

Sir James Young Simpson and Obstetric Analgesia

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Labor and delivery are amongst the most painful of human experiences. Women have been able to cope with these extreme conditions, probably in anticipation of the result and the passage of years and that the happy experiences of motherhood dull the memories of the pain. Pain in labor and delivery was thought to be essential to the birth process until well into the mid – nineteenth century¹. The idea of eliminating pain from natural childbirth was thought to be inappropriate and dangerous in terms of medical practice. To the religious sentiment prevailing at the time, it seemed meddling, interfering and unnatural. Overcoming these professional prejudices and religious oppositions would require a man of intellectual brilliance and compassion. It also helped that Sir James Young Simpson was a free thinker and a brilliant orator.

James Young Simpson (Figure 1) was born to a modest family on June 7, 1811 in Bathgate, Scotland. His father was the village baker and James was the youngest of his seven sons. Seeing his intellectual abilities at a young age, the family pooled in their resources to further his education. He was admitted to the University of Edinburgh at the age of 14 years into an arts course. He withdrew from it and graduated in medicine three years later. He completed all his courses and passed his final examination to be awarded the diploma from the Royal College of Edinburgh at the age of 18. He was deemed too young to practice medicine at this age and had to wait for two more years to be granted a license. During the interim, Simpson assisted family physicians, pathologists and visited clinics in England and France. Upon his return, he started a general practice but the main focus was on obstetrics. Soon to follow was the appointment to

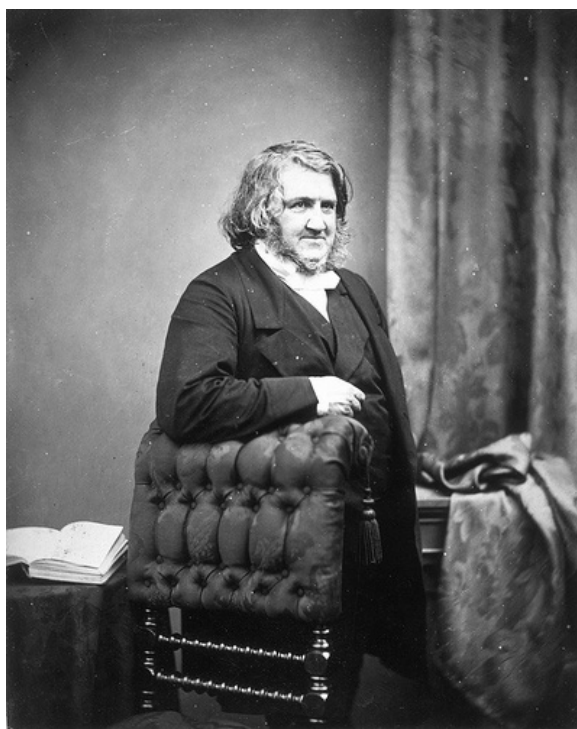


Figure 1. Sir James Young Simpson in his chambers.

the Chair of Midwifery at the University of Edinburgh at the age of 28.

Simpson's name at birth was "James Simpson", as recorded at his baptism. It is unknown why he formally adopted the middle name "Young". One theory is that, as a very young professor, he was flaunting his youth in front of his older peers or alternatively that he was known by the affectionate nickname of "Young Simpson" and decided to

incorporate it into his name. In any case, the young professor's lectures and teaching were much appreciated and his popularity grew by leaps and bounds. His observations in the field of surgery (without anesthesia) aroused a great need to ease the suffering of pain. He had heard about the work of Sir Humphry Davy with nitrous oxide and of Lister with ether. Recalling the words of Gallen: *Dolor dolentibus inutilis est* (Pain is useless to the pained), Simpson became a doughty advocate of pain relief during surgery.

In 1847, he tried it as a means of relieving the pain of childbirth. It proved effective, but had a number of undesirable side effects. The idea of chloroform came from David Waldie, who had been a student with Simpson before becoming an industrial chemist. Chloroform was first experimented upon at Simpson's residence at an after-dinner gathering. His house, 52 Queen Street, was a veritable melting pot of people from across the globe. Simpson tested chloroform on himself and on his guests before deciding that it was much better than ether. On 15 November 1847, he gave the first public demonstration of this new anaesthetic and a few days later published his highly influential 'Account of a New Anaesthetic Agent' ². As would be imagined, there was considerable professional and religious reticence to the idea. In 1853, Queen Victoria called upon his services during her seventh pregnancy. Along with John Snow, the first full-time court appointed anesthetist, he administered chloroform to Queen Victoria during the birth of Prince Leopold. Her Majesty was lavish in her thanks for the relief that it provided. This was the single most important event which bowled over the opposition to labor analgesia. Not long thereafter, Simpson was made a baronet, the inscription on his coat of arms reading *VICTO DOLORE* (pain is conquered). Simpson administered chloroform to Queen Victoria again during the birth of Princess Beatrice a few years later.

Simpson's name is synonymous with obstetric analgesia, but he is equally famous for his long obstetric forceps. He advocated pelvic applications of the forceps to minimize maternal trauma. For nearly a century, this was the most commonly used forceps technique throughout the world. He also contributed to the study of hermaphroditism, a subject considered taboo. Simpson was probably the first to stress the importance of bimanual

examination in gynecological practice ³. A brilliant mind, his interests ranged far beyond his profession. He published extensively on archaeology, was a keen antiquarian and was involved in literature, medical reforms and philanthropic enterprises. Simpson died of coronary disease in 1870. A day of public mourning was observed in Scotland and it is said that 30000 people attended his funeral and practically the whole city of Edinburgh joined the procession. A statue of James Young Simpson was erected on Queen Street, Edinburgh. (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A statue of James Young Simpson on Queen Street, Edinburgh

References

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