

Anaesthesia: counting backwards

Anaesthesia and the practice of medicine: historical perspectives. Keith Sykes, John Bunker. London: Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2007 (xv + 303 pp, \$40.55). ISBN 978 1 85315 674 8.

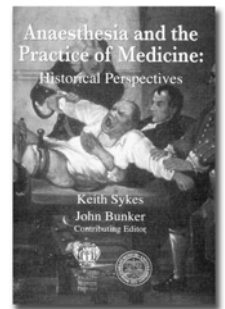
ALTHOUGH ABOUT HISTORICAL ASPECTS of anaesthesia, this is not a history textbook. You will find no mention of the Hyderabad Chloroform Commission, spinal anaesthesia receives less coverage than the shape of the world, and, surprisingly, there is absolutely nothing on intravenous fluid therapy. But to dismiss the book as lacking would be a serious miscalculation.

As the title states, it is about perspectives; in particular, the outlook of two towering figures of the latter half of 20th-century anaesthesia. These men witnessed, indeed superintended, much radical change from a time in the not-too-distant past, when a medical student or hospital porter might be pressed into anaesthetic service, to today's highly developed technology of artificial ventilation, patient monitoring and sophisticated pharmacology. With them and through them, anaesthesia has breached the confines of the operating theatre and burst forth into intensive care and beyond. It shows that necessity can triumph over adversity and persistence overcome disillusionment. It is progress not to be missed.

I was especially taken with the numerous illustrations, many completely new to me, and their scintillating vignettted captions which dot the text. This book has that rare quality of not only informing but also entertaining. For example, which famous anaesthetist was a closet world-champion wrestler? Why did Churchill grumble about his customised oxygen mask? And oh! — what possible connection is there between the shape of the world and anaesthesia? You'll have to read the book to find out.

If there is one criticism I would make, it is that Australian readers will find it no easy task to pursue the many books which are the references and further readings.

At a cost barely more than the pulp fiction one turns to in desperation at airports, this gem is a thousand times more satisfying. In a word, majestic!



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