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## 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.<sup>1,2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> This is remarkable considering that telegraphy had not yet been introduced, and the primary means of transportation and communication between England and India was by sea. The use of ether anaesthesia in India preceded its introduction in South Africa, Rhodesia, Australia, China, and Japan. Ether was used in London during an operation by Robert Liston on December 21, 1846.

Almost half a century after the event, Robert Cutler Hinckley, the son of a wealthy Boston merchant created a classic oil painting (*The First Operation with Ether*). The painting was completed as part of his graduation requirements at an Arts school in Paris. After many unsuccessful attempts to sell his work, a frustrated Hinckley was about to destroy the painting when a kindly curator convinced him to donate it to the Boston 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 famous works of art depicting medical events. In 2001, a few years after the 150<sup>th</sup> celebration of the introduction of ether anaesthesia, MGH unveiled another painting (*Ether Day, 1846*) depicting the same event.<sup>4</sup>

Morton's ether demonstration received prominent coverage in newspapers, medical journals, biographical works, novels, and in works of art. Moreover, articles about both paintings too have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and medical journals. In addition, a scholarly book has been written about Hinckley's masterpiece.

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 report suggests that anaesthesia may have been used earlier than March 11, 1847, at Madras General Hospital.<sup>5</sup> In any case, we only know the last name of the surgeon 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 19<sup>th</sup> century India was controlled by the British, a fair amount of useful information resides in Britain.<sup>5</sup> 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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