

Obituaries

RICHARD HANCOCK ELLIS

(1937–1995)

With the tragic and premature death of Richard Ellis the history of anaesthesia has lost one of its most outstanding researchers and exponents. Dick Ellis was born on 11 September 1937. He graduated from the London Hospital Medical School in 1961, and commenced his training in anaesthetics two years later. He became a Fellow of the Faculty of Anaesthetists in 1967, and after a period in South Africa and Rhodesia he was appointed consultant anaesthetist to St Bartholomew's Hospital in 1971. Three years later he became senior cardio-thoracic anaesthetist, an appointment that he held until his death.

During his early years at Bart's, Dick published several papers on clinical matters, notably on the sudden and potentially catastrophic fall of blood pressure that may accompany the use of acrylic cement during total hip replacement. However his very first paper was on one of the historical themes that he continued to research throughout his life, and which would have been the subject of a lecture that he was due to deliver at the Royal Society of Medicine in June; this was the story of the first operation, performed at his alma mater, for the relief of mitral stenosis.

Dick's contributions to the history of anaesthesia may be divided into two groups. During the mid-70s he began to research and publish on the introduction of anaesthesia into Great Britain. He continued his investigations into this early period during the rest of his life. He ascertained that the famous letter from Bigelow to Boott was not the first intimation of the introduction of ether anaesthesia received in this country. He located the sites of the first ether anaesthetic, and of John Snow's residence, and organized the erection of blue plaques to mark them. He delivered many prestigious lectures on the early days of anaesthesia, both up and down Great Britain and in the United States.

Dick's other contribution was to make more widely available for study several early and rare publications on anaesthesia. These included facsimile editions of the first textbook, by the London dentist John Robinson, one of Dick's heroes, and John Snow's series of essays describing his researches into the scientific basis of anaesthesia, issued under the general title *On narcotism by the inhalation of vapours*. These publications culminated in his transcription of John Snow's Case Books (published as the *Medical History Supplement* for 1994), a work of outstanding importance and the magnificent fruit of nine years endeavour. All were prefaced by scholarly introductory essays. Dick was also invited to edit and prepare for publication material for a third volume of essays on the first hundred years of anaesthesia left at his death by Stanley Sykes. This appeared, together with the reissue of the scarce and much sought-after preceding two volumes that he negotiated, in 1982.

Dick was blessed with a very happy marriage. He had the constant support of his charming wife, Liz, and she and their three delightful and gifted children were the centre of his life. But in addition to this, and in spite of being involved in a very busy and demanding clinical practice, Dick managed to find time to make contributions to the history of anaesthesia. His friends confidently expected that he would continue to add to his fine record for many years to come. Sadly this was not to be. The History of Anaesthesia Society, of which he was a founder member, is to undertake the conservation and rebinding of John Snow's Case Books as a tribute to his memory.

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