The fascinating history of anaesthesia: from biting the bullet to pain-free surgery

Surgery before anaesthesia was barbaric and unimaginably painful and the remarkable transformation of anaesthesia to the sophisticated science we know today will be on show in a new exhibition which opens at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists on Friday September 19.

The Geoffrey Kaye Museum of Anaesthetic History in Melbourne has been recently upgraded and includes new items, including equipment used in the battlefields of World War II, and which shows the clear progression of the profession in Australia and New Zealand.

The museum’s honorary curator Dr Christine Ball said the new exhibition was all the more interesting because it showed the relatively short period of time in which the advances had been made.

She said anaesthetic equipment from times of war were of particular historical significance.

"Anaesthesia in war time has always produced great changes," Dr Ball said.

Even the saying to "bite the bullet" – to endure a painful or otherwise unpleasant situation – is believed to have its origins in the practice of having a patient clench a bullet in his or her teeth as a way to cope with the extreme pain of a surgical procedure without anaesthetic.

“A lot of advances come with war because any equipment has to be portable and easily repaired – anaesthetists have to be inventive.”

The display includes a model mask, on loan from the Royal Australasian Colleges of Surgeons, which was used as the basis to repair a soldier’s facial injuries. These types of injuries inspired Ivan Magill and Stanley Rowbotham to develop more efficient endotracheal tubes to allow the necessary surgeries to be performed. A variety of what have become known as “Magill’s endotracheal tubes” are on display.

Dr Ball said the museum told the story of anaesthesia – from surgery being performed without pain relief at all – to the most recent techniques.

“There are people who will see the museum who are likely to have memories of ether and the Schimmelbusch mask [a wire-framed device covered with several layers of gauze and applied to the patient’s face over the mouth and nose] from their own procedures,” Dr Ball said.

People are often drawn to medical museums with a sense of macabre; there are certainly objects on display which were used in the past but are inconceivable today.

“Surgery before anaesthesia was barbaric and it is astonishing to think that anaesthesia has only been available since 1846."
“As well as being a source of interest to the general public, we want to help anaesthetists understand their own history and have a place where they can see the changes throughout time in their own profession.

“Only 170 years ago people expected to die from operations, faced with surgery without pain relief and often overwhelming infection. Now they go home one day after major surgery.”

Founded in 1935 by anaesthetist Dr Geoffrey Kaye (1903-1986), the Geoffrey Kaye Museum of Anaesthetic History chronicles the history of anaesthesia, and pain medicine. It is one of the largest and most diverse collections of anaesthetic equipment and objects in the world. It will be officially opened by Victorian Health Minister David Davis on Friday September 19.

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