Rare anaesthesia artefacts on display for world symposium

A rare casebook detailing the early administration of anaesthesia, an 1847 newspaper article that led to the first anaesthetics delivered in Australia and New Zealand, and historic needles and masks will be on display for an international meeting of anaesthesia history enthusiasts in Melbourne next week.

The Geoffrey Kaye Museum of Anaesthetic History at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists is one of the three most significant anaesthesia museums in the world and for the first time its collection will be the focus of a satellite meeting of the 8th International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia.

The casebook by English surgeon and anaesthetic pioneer, Mr Joseph Clover, is the oldest significant anaesthesia-related item in the collection and covers his medical and surgical experience from 1846 to 1853.

Clover expert and honorary assistant museum curator, Dr Christine Ball, who will be addressing the meeting, says these dates are significant as they cover the period of the first London demonstration of anaesthesia on December 21, 1846, at which Mr Clover was believed to be present.

“Mr Clover was at the forefront of the development of anaesthesia as a specialty and his accounts of these early experiments with ether and chloroform, which sometimes failed to relieve pain and often resulted in near death, are valuable for learning about the development of anaesthesia,” Dr Ball says.

The casebook was lost to history until 2007 when museum staff opened up a picture frame to investigate a page of neat, faded handwriting on display.

“What we discovered was an entire casebook of Mr Clover encased in the frame, and opened at a page that detailed a case involving a dangerous loss of consciousness from chloroform that nearly led to a patient’s death,” Dr Ball says.

Mr Clover also invented pieces of equipment to deliver ether and chloroform safely and controllably, some of which are held in the museum’s collection alongside other historic devices to deliver anaesthesia.

The collection also includes a copy of the Illustrated London News from January 9, 1847, which reported the first demonstration of anaesthesia in London. The news took about four months to get to Australia and New Zealand, where the illustration of the anaesthesia apparatus was quickly copied and used for the delivery of the first anaesthetic in Australia in June 1847 and in New Zealand in September 1847.
The collection was started in 1935 by leading Melbourne anaesthetist, Dr Geoffrey Kaye, and was first displayed as a museum in 1946.

Honorary museum curator, Dr Rod Westhorpe, says the museum now holds more than 8000 items, including an 1876 nitrous oxide gasometer used for dental surgery, portable anaesthetic machines from the 1950s, early blood transfusion equipment and spinal needles, masks and other artefacts showcasing the history of anaesthesia.

“It is one of the largest and most comprehensive anaesthetic history collections in the world, telling the story of anaesthesia from its earliest beginnings through to the advances in drugs, airway management and monitoring that has made anaesthesia so safe today,” Dr Westhorpe says.

“The Geoffrey Kaye Museum of Anaesthetic History is considered one of the most significant anaesthesia museums in the world, alongside the Anaesthesia Museum at the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland and the Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology in Chicago, and it is a coup for the College to host visitors as part of the 8th International Symposium on the History of Anaesthesia.”

The symposium is held every four to five years and for the first time is being held in the southern hemisphere in Sydney. It features speakers and delegates from about 20 countries, including Professor John Severinghaus, an eminent US anaesthetic researcher who discovered the cause of altitude sickness and invented equipment to measure blood gases, and Australian Professor Michael Cousins, who is talking about the history of pain management.

The symposium is currently being held in Sydney until Friday. The two-day Geoffrey Kaye satellite meeting begins in Melbourne next Tuesday January 29.

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