

THE HISTORY OF
ANAESTHESIA SOCIETY
PROCEEDINGS



Volume 36

Proceedings of the Summer Scientific Meeting

The Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern
7th and 8th September 2006

PENTOTHAL POSTCARDS AND BEYOND

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This is an introduction to my display of postcards concerning anaesthesia and related subjects which was on display at the meeting. I am a postcard geek, more properly described as a deltiologist, the term for a postcard collector. This is derived from the Greek word deltos, a writing tablet.

Dr David Lai presented Abbott's Pentothal Postcards to you in Sheffield¹ and also at the Sixth International Symposium at Cambridge last year². He has also published a book on these cards³ and is still collecting. His papers and the variety of these cards awoke my interest in advertising cards as part of anaesthetic history. Let us just consider the cards from the British Isles. These include three from the Irish Republic, four from England, two from Scotland and one each from Wales, the Isle of Man and Lundy Island. The latter is interesting as the text describes it as a place without Pentothal. The last card in this group is a super-sized card of the RMS Queen Elizabeth.

Postcards developed in the latter decades of the 19th century but their heyday was between 1900 and 1930. They were the equivalent of the text or e-mail at a time when in the UK there were several postal deliveries a day: so a postcard sent from a hospital by a patient would get a response the same day. I have been collecting postcards of anaesthetic interest for twenty five years and presented these as a historic resource to this Society at Epsom in 1990⁴, the 11th World Congress of Anaesthesiology in Sydney in 1996⁵ and as a poster at the Sixth International Symposium⁶. There is great interest in the history of anaesthesia amongst the public: I have recently spoken to the Dorset Postcard Club and, in the future, I am to address my local history society as well as hopefully to present a large display at one of the largest postcard fairs in Europe.

My collection contains at least two hundred cards mainly of operating theatres. Some depict operations either posed or real and have a variety of detail of anaesthetic apparatus. In the first group the cards show: operations using chloroform (presumably) as the Vernon Harcourt Apparatus is pictured (Figure 1), Clover's Ether Apparatus (Figure 2), an Ombredanne, a dental anaesthetic and Bob, the anaesthetist, with his machine. A dropper bottle is in the last of this



Figure 1 Vernon Harcourt chloroform inhaler



Figure 2 Clover's ether inhaler

group. Interestingly in today's climate, several cards have shown nurses administering the anaesthetics. In the next group a card shows a child in an 'Iron lung'. The final card has unclear anaesthetic apparatus. It is from a group at the Russian front in the First World War. What is clear and shows the reality of some cards, is that the operation is a leg amputation and the amputated limb is on the floor. As well as reality cards there are a number of comic cards. They make fun of anaesthesia as well as surgery.

Finally, let us revisit the Pentothal Cards. Why were none sent to the UK ? I believe it's because we used I think May and Baker's thiopentone, not Abbott's. These cards are part of a group known to collectors as Dear Doctor Postcards. A few were sent early in the 20th century, more by the 1930's, but most in the 50's and 60's. I think it's largely died out today, but looking at my own correspondence cards I found this one of Singapore's Changi Airport. It was sent to me in 1994 by a company making temperature and humidity control equipment as I had already expressed interest in attending the World Congress in Sydney two years later.

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