



PRESS RELEASE

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A new exhibition exploring the use and abuse of anaesthetic drugs

A Blessing in Disguise - Misuse of Anaesthesia

11 October 2011 – October 2012

The Anaesthesia Heritage Centre based at the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI) will open an exhibition on Tuesday 11 October highlighting the history of how powerful anaesthetic agents have been used and misused. *A Blessing in Disguise – Misuse of Anaesthesia*, shows how various substances, such as cocaine or morphine, were used from the earliest times to modern day, sometimes with disastrous effects. This exhibition will look at the origins of these powerful drugs and how they have been developed through history for medical use, but how they have also been misused. Anaesthetic drugs have been used through the ages recreationally, often before their medical use was discovered. In the wrong hands, they have been used as murder weapons. They have been used to execute criminals and as a torture method. The exhibition illustrates the risks of addiction and overdose with celebrities, including Michael Jackson and Heath Ledger, dying from prescription pills and drug overdoses.

Modern day anaesthetic medicine is controlled by strict safety standards. Anaesthetists undergo nine years of training to learn how to administer these drugs safely. They are medically trained doctors and form the largest specialty group in NHS hospitals.

The Anaesthesia Heritage Centre is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday between 10.00-16.00 at 21 Portland Place, London W1B 1PY. Admission is free but booking is highly recommended via heritage@aagbi.org or by calling 020 7631 1650/8806. Group bookings can be taken for up to 15 people. For further information visit www.aagbi.org/heritage

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Notes for Editors

Ether Frolics and Nitrous Oxide Parties Information and Anecdotes

In the late 18th century and early 19th century, nitrous oxide was inhaled for entertainment and amusement. This form of entertainment seemed to be without any long-term harm, and was widespread in certain social circles.

In the USA, wandering lecturers would hold public gatherings called ‘ether frolics’ where members of the public were encouraged to inhale diethyl ether or nitrous oxide to demonstrate the mind altering properties for these agents whilst providing entertainment for the audience.

Gardner Colton made a living by travelling in America and giving scientific lectures. He often demonstrated the effects of nitrous oxide. In 1844, Horace Wells was present at one of these meetings. He noticed that a young man called Samuel Cooley banged his shin while under the influence of nitrous oxide but could not remember doing so and experienced no pain. This led Wells to experiment with nitrous oxide and to attempt to demonstrate its anaesthetic properties with disastrous results.

Just like Wells, Crawford Williamson Long a GP in the USA inhaled ether and noticed that he did not remember acquiring bruises whilst under its influence.

What visitors say about the Anaesthesia Heritage Centre

“A beautiful museum I am sure not enough people are aware of...”

“A gem of a museum”

“It was an insightful, first glimpse of anaesthesia for us, we have walked away with more knowledge and understanding now.”

About the AAGBI

The Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI) was founded in 1932. It’s the leading representative body for over 10,000 anaesthetists in the UK and overseas, and is one of the UK’s largest single grant providers for anaesthetic research. The AAGBI has a broad constitution that enables



it to promote and advance education, safety and research in anaesthesia, as well as the professional aspects of the specialty and the welfare of individual anaesthetists.

Possible interviewees:



Dr William Harrop-Griffiths
President Elect

Will Harrop-Griffiths is a Consultant Anaesthetist at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington. He is currently Vice-President of the AAGBI but takes up his post of President Elect in September. His interests include obstetric anaesthesia and vascular anaesthesia.



Dr Andrew Hartle
Honorary Secretary

Dr Hartle is a Consultant Anaesthetist and Intensivist at St Mary's Hospital, London, part of Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, where he is also Chairman of the Clinical Risk Committee, Lead Clinician for Patient Safety and the Trust Lead for Mental Capacity.

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