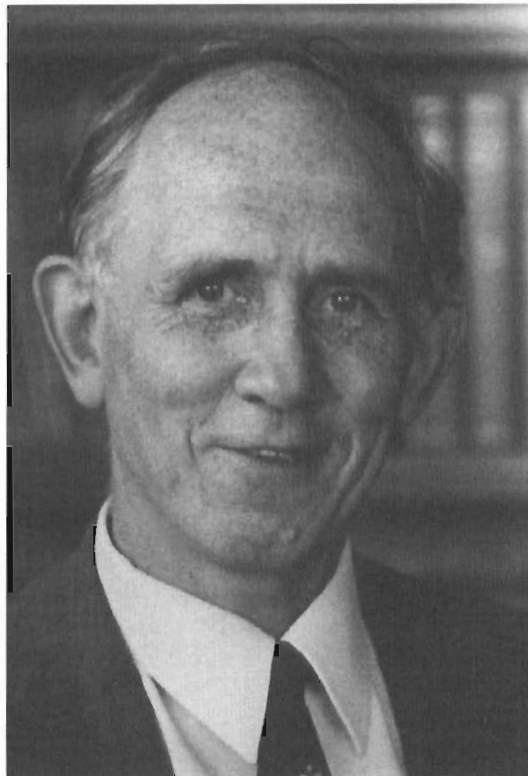


**OBITUARY****William Denis Ashley Smith OBE MD MB BS FRCA - 1918-2002**

Denis Smith was born on 5th July 1918, but did not come to anaesthesia until 36 years later. The intervening years were not wasted. He was educated at Imperial Service College, Windsor and at Northampton Engineering College where he became enthused by the new radar technology. The outbreak of war interrupted his course and he served in the Signals-Radar Branch of the Royal Air Force from 1939 to 1946. During this time he was at the forefront of the deployment of radar, serving on the South Coast and in East Anglia, India and Burma. He operated a key radar station which was repeatedly bombed during the Battle of Britain, and he was the first to detect birds on radar. In Burma, he was serving in Imphal when it was attacked by the Japanese. He was promoted to Wing Commander and appointed OBE in 1945.

On demobilisation, he entered St Mary's Medical School, qualifying in 1952. His first house job was at the King Edward VII Memorial Hospital, Ealing and then his powerful streak of individuality took command. His second house job was at University College Hospital of the West Indies. Fortunately for our specialty he was attracted to anaesthesia and started his training in Jamaica. In 1954 he took his Velocette motor cycle to British Honduras, and rode north through Mexico and the United States into Canada, carrying his belongings with him, and sleeping most nights in a tent. At least one night he was woken by bandits but suffered no harm. His goal was the Department of Anaesthetics of Saskatoon, headed in those days by Gordon Wyant, where he continued his postgraduate education, before returning to Southampton where he worked under Patrick Shackleton.



His career then moved into research, first in bioengineering at Vickers and, in 1961, as a research fellow under Professor Ronald Woolmer at the Royal College of Surgeons. He started a major study on the administration of nitrous oxide and oxygen for out-patient dental surgery. If genius is defined as infinite capacity to take pains, Denis rapidly established his position as a genius. He published seventeen masterly papers from 1961 to 1964, dealing with instrumentation, studies on volunteers and detailed observations on 410 anaesthetics in the dental chair at the Royal Dental Hospital, employing his bio-engineering skills and familiarity with the latest technology.

In 1964 Denis was appointed first assistant to the new professorial Department of Anaesthesia of the University of Leeds. In addition to a substantial clinical load, the academic department initiated a massive programme of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. The former involved taking groups of 8 students at a time for a full-time two-week course, comprising tutorials and supervised clinical attachments. This threw a huge burden on the staff, and Denis responded with distinction and meticulous attention to detail. The regional postgraduate didactic teaching programme comprised one whole-day a week devoted to lectures, yet another burden for the staff. Finally we pioneered a do-it-yourself laboratory series of experiments for post-graduates to learn methods of clinical measurement. Denis Smith excelled in the very difficult preparation of many of these experiments.

He also started writing his MD thesis on nitrous oxide in relation to dental anaesthesia, soon becoming aware that the historical background of his subject contained substantial areas of ignorance. His reaction was typical of his remarkable capacity to take infinite pains. He embarked on a re-examination of the experiments of the pioneers, but with modern techniques for measuring uptake, including a body plethysmograph which he made himself, and in which he was often anaesthetised.

His experimental work was combined with historical research, and it is hard to see how he found the time for so much work. A classic series of nine articles on the history of nitrous oxide anaesthesia was published in the *British Journal of Anaesthesia* (1964-1966) and became a supplement to his MD thesis (1969). These articles were reproduced in his celebrated book *Under the Influence*, published in 1982 by Macmillan. A tenth article on early manufacture, storage and purity of nitrous oxide was triggered by the release of a small batch of cylinders of nitrous oxide heavily contaminated with nitric oxide, and resulting in two fatalities. His work on Priestley was particularly appropriate to a scholar working in Leeds.

The history of nitrous oxide soon became Denis's consuming interest, and he set new standards of excellence in this field. In particular were the remarkable studies of nitrous oxide uptake in volunteers (again including Denis himself) undertaken in the hyperbaric chamber in Glasgow, to repeat the observations of Paul Bert and others, but with intensive monitoring. In his extensive field research of the pioneers he showed particular aptitude for recruiting local helpers, and he distinguished himself by the discovery of the 'Antiquack' letter in the *Lancet*, and gained enormous insights into the life, times, and work of Henry Hill Hickman.

Denis was appointed Reader in 1966 and became Regional Educational Adviser (1977-1981). He sat on the Council of the Association of Anaesthetists (1976-1979), and was awarded the John Snow Silver Medal in 1984. He was President of the Section of Anaesthesia of the Royal Society

of Medicine (1986-1987) and presented his last papers to the History of Anaesthesia Society in 1988.

He retired in 1983 and his last publications were in 1986, based on papers presented at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the Australian Society of Anaesthetists in 1984. His health began to deteriorate while he was writing a book on Hickman. A manuscript for this book is in the possession of the History of Anaesthesia Society and hope remains that it may one day be published.

Denis died on 12 October 2002, and will long be remembered for his outstanding qualities of humanity, dedication, insight and attention to detail in so many aspects of anaesthesia, particularly its history. He is survived by his wife Shirley, their children Ru, Adrian and Lucy, and three grandchildren.

**J Nunn and M Hargreaves**