

Village Echoes

AN UNTIMELY DEATH IN GOUDHURST IN 1910

In 1847, the Scottish physician Sir James Young Simpson first used chloroform as an anaesthetic, testing it on himself. It was administered by dripping the liquid onto a cloth or a sponge held above the face so that the vapours were inhaled, and its effects worked quickly.

There were early reports of fatalities due to chloroform, beginning with a 15-year-old girl in 1848. Skill and care were required to differentiate between an effective dose and one that paralysed the lungs, causing death. The use of chloroform spread quickly and, in 1853, it was given to Queen Victoria during the birth of her eighth child, Prince Leopold.

The police constable giving evidence at the inquest was James Eversfield, who was living and serving in Goudhurst at the time. The inquest concerned the death of his fellow police constable, James Truphet Saywell, a 35 year old who lived at Riseden.

On 21 September 1910 a group of hop-pickers was causing a disturbance at Goudhurst Station. PC Saywell was attempting to quieten things down when he injured his left shoulder. He didn't take too much notice of the injury until he was unable to use his left arm and he went to see the village doctor. Dr Sealy, advised PC Saywell that it would be necessary to administer chloroform in order to put the shoulder back in place. On Saturday morning 1 October PC Saywell went to Dr Sealy's surgery, accompanied by PC Eversfield, where he was stripped to the waist and laid on a mattress on the floor. Dr Sealy placed a cloth over his face and poured some chloroform from a bottle onto it. After that the doctor allowed drops to fall onto the cloth at intervals of a few seconds for four or five times. Suddenly Dr Sealy, who was feeling the patient's right pulse, snatched the cloth from his face and shouted "His heart has stopped". Despite immediate attempts to resuscitate him, PC Saywell could not be saved. Dr Mapleton, another Goudhurst doctor, was telephoned and

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summoned to the surgery where death was confirmed and the case was reported to the police.

Dr Mapleton subsequently carried out a post-mortem examination and at the inquest he said that “in his opinion death was due to syncope (loss of consciousness) caused or accelerated by the administration of chloroform. There was congestion of all the internal organs and the left of his heart was soft and flabby”. He suggested that when the doctor administered the chloroform his fingers should have been spread out under the cloth and the cloth should have been some five inches above the patient’s face to allow plenty of fresh air so the chloroform was not too strong. The cloth should be placed nearer after a dozen breaths but should never absolutely cover the patient’s face.

Giving his evidence, PC Eversfield told the Court that Dr Sealy pulled the stopper out of the chloroform bottle, which was three parts full. The cloth covered the patient’s face and was not pulled off.

At that point Dr Sealy said he wanted legal representation before continuing, so the inquest was adjourned. When Dr Sealy gave evidence at the later hearing he said that the statement given that the cloth was not pulled off the patient’s face until he found that his pulse had stopped was inaccurate.

The jury found that death was due to misadventure, and added a rider that more care should have been exercised when ministering the chloroform. They expressed their opinion that two qualified medical men should be present when chloroform was given.

The Coroner said that a departmental committee on Coroners’ Courts and the Coroners’ work had made a special report expressly recommending that “Two members of the medical profession should always be present when anaesthetic is given. Probably in the course of time this would become law”.

Soon after this case, because of the number of deaths recorded, the use of chloroform declined. Today surgery under a general anaesthetic involves a whole team of professionals and, depending on the level of pain or tissue damage, a dislocated shoulder is often corrected without the need for anaesthetic. How things have moved on in relatively short space of time.

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