

The History of Geriatric Anesthesia in the United States and the Society for the Advancement of Geriatric Anesthesia

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KEYWORDS

• Geriatric • Anesthesiology • Aging • Elderly • Aging population • History

KEY POINTS

- Interest in older patients within the specialty of anesthesiology has existed for at least 60 years.
- The American Society of Anesthesiologists Committee on Geriatric Anesthesia and the Society for the Advancement of Geriatric Anesthesia have been responsible for most educational material available on geriatric anesthesia.
- The American Geriatrics Society has played a major role in raising the profile of aging in the specialty of anesthesiology and in many surgical specialties.
- There are only a modest number of anesthesiologists whose research and academic focus is on the aging patient.

INTRODUCTION

Geriatric anesthesia as focus of interest is a rare phenomenon, even in the current climate of increasing numbers of older patients having surgery. Sixty years ago only a handful of anesthesiologists likely had such a focus. Although the numbers of anesthesiologists whose educational and/or research interests emphasize geriatric anesthesia is still small, the infrastructure to encourage and support such individuals has progressed immeasurably. This article describes how this subspecialty developed and what has been accomplished in the past 60 years. Much of the progress has come from the efforts of the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) Committee on Geriatric Anesthesia, outreach programs by the American Geriatrics Society (AGS), and the Society for the Advancement of Geriatric Anesthesia (SAGA).

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THE EARLY YEARS

Interest in geriatrics within the specialty of anesthesiology has been present for seven decades, with a review article on geriatric anesthesia by Emery Rovenstine published in the very first edition of the journal *Geriatrics*, and perhaps the first textbook on the topic having been published in 1955.^{1,2} What is particularly interesting about the textbook is that there are only 39 references, and none of the citations that involve aging came from the anesthesia literature. The same book author then published another text in 1964,³ but thereafter a full 20 years passed before more books or monographs were published in the 1980s.⁴⁻⁸ Despite the apparent interest in the field as illustrated by these texts, there was very little available in the way of continuing medical education on geriatric anesthesia. In the 1980s Drs Charles McLeskey and Stanley Muravchick provided refresher course style lectures on geriatric anesthesia at major anesthesia meetings and the occasional state society meeting, but that was about it (Charles McLeskey and Stanley Muravchick, personal communication, 2015). Only one panel on geriatric anesthesia at a major meeting comes to mind, in 1985, organized by Dr McLeskey.

The one exception to this general lack of continuing medical education was the annual Geriatric Anesthesia Symposium held at Washington University beginning in 1974. Dr C. Ronald Stephen, who was then chair of the Department of Anesthesiology, considered geriatric anesthesia an underappreciated field, not only clinically but also with respect to research. He recognized that older patients did not respond the same way to anesthesia as did younger patients, and hoped that an annual symposium would stimulate research on the topic (William Owens, personal communication, 2015). Dr Stephen picked Veterans Day weekend because the ASA calendar was always empty. Dr William Owens was placed in charge of meeting organization and educational program, a position he largely continued even after he became chair at Washington University. This symposium remains the only successful stand-alone annual meeting on geriatric anesthesia ever in the United States, and over the years featured many speakers who would later become prominent in the field. Eventually attendance began to wane, perhaps in part because educational offerings in geriatric anesthesia became more common at other, larger meetings, and the last symposium was held in 1994.

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ANESTHESIOLOGISTS COMMITTEE ON GERIATRIC ANESTHESIA

The field began to gather momentum in the early 1990s when the ASA initiated their Committee on Geriatric Anesthesia in 1992. The initial chair, Dr Susan Krechel, was a former member of the Department of Anesthesiology at Washington University in St. Louis. Perhaps the highlight of her 4 years as chair was organizing the ASA Workshop on the Care of the Geriatric Patient: Anesthesia and Public Relations, held in San Diego in February, 1995. The program was excellent, but attendance was sparse. A portion of the program was repeated as a symposium at the ASA Annual Meeting that fall, with reasonable attendance. Thereafter the Committee focused on providing panels for the ASA annual meeting and has contributed to the development of at least one panel for all but one ASA annual meeting from 1998 onward. Four more textbooks on geriatric anesthesia were published in the 1990s.⁹⁻¹²

During his year as Committee Chair in 1996, Dr J. G. Reves organized the Consensus Conference on Surgery and the Elderly that was held in Durham, North Carolina in September 1997. This meeting brought together anesthesiologists, surgeons, gerontologists, and representatives from the AGS and the National Institutes of Health to identify gaps in knowledge of how age confers perioperative risk and to

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