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SPECIAL ARTICLE

Another look at religious objections to obstetric anaesthesia

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ABSTRACT

Starting with the earliest biographies of James Young Simpson, the topic of religious opposition to obstetric anaesthesia in 1847 was gradually embellished in historical articles. Objective data are lacking and it has been suggested that this is a myth of recent medical history. A search for more information led to a contemporaneous case-book of the maternity hospital in Edinburgh, which was examined. The provision of anaesthesia in the 11 months before publication of Simpson's pamphlet *Answer to the Religious Objections* was compared with that in the 11 months after. This revealed a marked increase ($P < 0.01$) in the provision of anaesthesia for childbirth after the publication of Simpson's pamphlet in December 1847. This analysis supports the existence of opposition to obstetric anaesthesia and the success of Simpson's pamphlet in overcoming it, but the introduction of chloroform about six weeks earlier, may also have contributed.

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Introduction

In December 1847, shortly after introducing chloroform in Edinburgh, James Young Simpson published a pamphlet *Answer to the Religious Objections advanced against the Employment of Anaesthetic Agents in Midwifery and Surgery*.¹ Thousands of copies were printed. After his death in 1870, some authors^{2,3} progressively exaggerated the misgivings of religious women, extending this to primary objections by the Church.⁴ This trend continued into the 20th century, for example in Grantly Dick Read's *Childbirth Without Fear* published in 1953.⁵ In 1977, Farr researched the alleged opposition to obstetric anaesthesia for a PhD thesis⁶ and followed this up with two papers^{7,8} in which, having found virtually no written evidence, he dismissed the religious opposition as a myth of historiography.

The topic was revisited in 2000 by Russell, who opined that the said religious opposition had become an established myth of recent medical history, acceptance of which continued.⁹ This stimulated further debate in 2001 by Adams¹⁰ and Maltby.¹¹ While concurring with Farr, they pointed out that it was Murphy¹² who had first incriminated the Church as a body in

1855, and that others besides Simpson (Protheroe Smith,¹³ Bainbrigge¹⁴) had also written answers to religious opposition in 1848. Adams and Maltby suggested that opposition was heard rather than read and that primary material may have been lost or destroyed.

Case-book of the Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital

A source of further information, not previously utilised in detail, is the case-book of the Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital (ERMH), 1844–72.¹⁵ This is in the Manuscripts Collection within the library of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Details of deliveries for 1847–48 were methodically recorded in the case-book, although the record may not be totally comprehensive.

It is important to note that most of Simpson's obstetric practice was peripatetic. He would deliver 'well to do' ladies in their own homes. The ERMH had been set up as a charity, opening in 1844. Many of the patients were unmarried. Simpson did not attend regularly; he was called only for cases of extreme difficulty. Perhaps he also went there to try out new methods: thus he presided at the first use in the hospital of ether (2 February 1847), chloroform (21 November 1847), bisulphuret of carbon (carbon bisulphide, 14 March 1848) and a new extracting instrument, the Air Tractor (15 December 1848). From 1846 to 1852 the hospital was situated at Milton

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House, which no longer exists; its site on the Canongate is now occupied by the Royal Mile School.

The first obstetric delivery under ether had been conducted by Simpson on 19 January 1847, but this was not at the ERMH.¹⁶ The first use of ether at that hospital was on 2 February 1847, although the patient had been admitted at the end of January. Therefore, 1 February 1847 seems a suitable starting date for a comparison of the use of anaesthesia at the hospital before and after Simpson's pamphlet *Answer to the Religious Objections*. It is unclear exactly when in December 1847 the pamphlet was distributed, although letters to Simpson thanking him for it suggest this was probably mid to late December; so it seems safest to consider the period *before* his pamphlet as extending to 31 December 1847, and the period *after* the pamphlet as commencing on 1 January 1848.

Analysis of case records at the ERMH before and after distribution of Simpson's pamphlet

A comparison of the figures for the 11 months of February–December 1847 with those for the 11 months of January–November 1848 is shown in Table 1. From 1 February to 20 May 1847 there were only three administrations of ether. From 21 May 1847 no further anaesthetics were given until 21 November 1847, the date of introduction of chloroform, which was given to 17 women by the end of that year (five in November, 12 in December). In the 11 months preceding 1 January 1848, 202 women delivered, of whom 20 received anaesthesia (9.9%). In the 11 months commencing 1 January 1848 there were 186 deliveries with 72 anaesthetics (38.7%) (Table 1). The difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.001$, chi-squared test).

Evaluation of the analysis

It is remarkable that despite Simpson's glowing report on ether in midwifery (March 1847),¹⁶ it was given to only three patients at the ERMH in 1847. This suggests there was opposition to it. On 1 December 1847, Simpson read to the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh his paper *Superinduction of anaesthesia in natural and morbid parturition: with cases illustrative of the use and effects of chloroform in obstetric practice*.¹⁷ Therein, he urged the employment of anaesthesia "by every principle of true humanity, as well as by every

principle of true religion". News of this probably spread by word of mouth even before his pamphlet *Answer to the Religious Objections*. Notably there were 12 cases of chloroform administration at the ERMH in December 1847.

The analysis of deliveries in the case-book of the ERMH reveals that following distribution of Simpson's pamphlet *Answer to the Religious Objections*, there was a significant increase in the provision of anaesthesia. While this does not prove cause and effect *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, equally the possibility that the rise in anaesthesia rate was related to the pamphlet cannot be discounted.

Discussion

More recent reviewers have overlooked the fact that the first mention of religious objections to ether in obstetric practice was NOT by Simpson, but by Dr Protheroe Smith at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. Commenting on abolishing some usual concomitants of labour including pain, in *The Lancet* of 1 May 1847, he wrote: "Can this be accomplished by ether – and if so, is it justifiable on Christian principles? as I have frequently been asked." He then argued that it certainly was justifiable.¹⁸

In a recent biography of Simpson,¹⁹ the author, McCrae, avoided perpetuating the alleged myth of religious objections to obstetric anaesthesia. He wrote that Simpson was surprised that the anticipated torrent of (religious) opposition to chloroform in obstetrics did not arrive. This seems a sensible summary, albeit without evidence that Simpson was surprised, but is there a risk that future biographers will "run with this" to the other extreme?

At that time there was a widespread belief that pain provided a means of atonement for sin.²⁰ The fact that Farr found no written primary evidence of religious opposition to relief of pain in childbirth does not guarantee that it did not exist. The great philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood pointed out the use of "unwritten sources".²¹

There are ideas and moral values that have been passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, and largely escaped being written down. Sometimes these can be inferred from other written material. An apposite example is the following excerpt from the (Edinburgh) Free Church Magazine of 1847:²²

Table 1 Use of anaesthesia for deliveries at Edinburgh Royal Maternity Hospital 1847–48

	Number of patients	Patients given anaesthesia		
		ether	chloroform	carbon disulphide
01/02/1847 – 31/12/1847	202	3	17	0
01/01/1848 – 30/11/1848	186	0	71	1

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