

Horace Wells (1815 - 1848) and William TG Morton (1819 - 1868) ...pioneers in anaesthesiology

To recount the story of the introduction of anaesthesia into clinical practice is to realise just how influential were the efforts of two dentists who were among the first to realise that pain-free surgery could indeed be accomplished.

William Morton, who was apprenticed to Wells, focused on ether as an anaesthetic agent. In September 1846 he performed a painless extraction and the next month administered ether to a patient from whom a tumour in the neck was painlessly removed.



Horace Wells (1815 - 1848)



TG Morton (1819 - 1868)



A sceptic may argue that it was because dentistry was so severely painful that it was inevitable that dentists would try any remedy to render their treatments more comfortable! Thus it was that in December 1844 a dentist, Horace Wells, attended a public demonstration on the effects of inhaling nitrous oxide.

He observed that a participant under the influence of the Laughing Gas did not apparently feel any pain when he forcefully kicked a wooden bench. Intrigued by the potential, Wells the very next day inhaled nitrous oxide and had his assistant, Dr Riggs, extract a tooth ...painlessly!

Wells gave a public demonstration of the technique to medical students at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston on 20th January, 1845. The patient did cry out during the extraction, although he later explained he had not experienced any pain. The students jeered and Wells departed forlornly back to Hartford, where he was in practice, with William Morton as his apprentice.

This was in fact the start of a decline for Wells: he closed his dental office nine times and relocated six times between 1836 and 1847. He withdrew from dentistry in 1845 and became a shower-bath salesman.

After moving to New York in 1848, he became addicted to chloroform and under the influence threw sulphuric acid over two prostitutes. In jail for the offence, he slit his femoral artery with a razor and died.

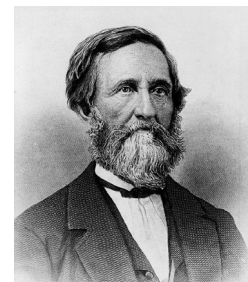
In 1864 the American Dental Association named Wells as the discoverer of modern anaesthesia and he was also recognised by the Parisian Medical Society and the American Medical Association.

Morton then tried to claim a patent for the use of ether. identified in the application as "letheon". The profession decried the approach suggesting it was not professionally justified. Morton persisted with these attempts and also made applications to the United States Government for recompense to the tune of \$100.000. All these approaches failed.

He did perform valuable service in the Army of the Potomac when he was able to administer ether to more than two thousand wounded soldiers, who would be deeply grateful for the relief obtained.

Morton died of a cerebrovascular accident in 1868, and it is recorded that the attending surgeon remarked to his class: "Young gentlemen, you see before you a man who has done more for humanity and for the relief of suffering, than any man who has ever lived."

Now to a disclosure: the contributions of the two dentists notwithstanding, but in 1842, a medical practitioner, Crawford Williamson Long, employed ether as an anaesthetic, preceding our champions! He published only in 1849 although he had demonstrated the technique several times to surgeons.



Whoever may take the credit finally, all dentists are indebted to these pioneers who have made the burden of Dentistry a little easier to bear.

With thanks to Prof Bill Evans