We'll drink to that: the 200th anniversary of Australia's oldest hospital

To the Editor: The entertaining history of Sydney Hospital by Kappagoda[1] illustrates the risk of accepting local lore as fact. The assertions that Sydney Hospital "hosted the first operation [in Australia] under general anaesthetic" and that it was "a leg amputation under chloroform" are both incorrect.

The first surgical operations under general anaesthesia in Australia took place in Launceston, Tasmania, on Monday 7 June 1847, using ether administered with apparatus that had been depicted in the *Illustrated London News*.[2,3] Two patients were successfully anaesthetised by Dr William Russ Pugh — both walked home and were completely happy with the procedure.

The operation referred to by Kappagoda was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) on Monday 28 June 1847 as having occurred "a few days back"[4] — at least 2 weeks after Pugh's patients were anaesthetised. Further, ether, not chloroform, was used in Sydney. The *SMH* reporter had also seen ether used to anaesthetise patients on other occasions, but these patients were undergoing dental extraction.

The decision to operate may have been precipitated by a news item in the *SMH* on Thursday 24 June 1847. The paper reported that "The medical men at Launceston have made several successful experiments in performing surgical operations on patients who have inhaled ether."[5] To local readers, it would have been obvious that this had occurred at least several days, and possibly several weeks, before the Sydney surgery, because of the delay in transmitting news from Launceston to Sydney. Perhaps this news spurred the Sydney surgeons to act.

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1 Kappagoda A. We'll drink to that: the 200th anniversary of Australia's oldest hospital. *Med J Aust* 2012, 196: 77-78.
2 Anon. St John's Hospital — surgical operations — the influence of ether. *Launceston Examiner* 1847; 9 Jun: 370. http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/36252255/3613004 (accessed Jan 2012).
3 Mr Hooper's ether inhaler. *Illustrated London News* 1847; 9 Jan: 30.
4 The painless surgery excitement. *Sydney Morning Herald* 1847; 28 Jun: p. 2, c. 3. http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/4091116 (accessed Jan 2012).
5 Anon. The medical men at Launceston. *Sydney Morning Herald* 1847; 24 Jun: p. 3, c. 6. http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/1514842 (accessed Jan 2012). ❑

To the Editor: The first recorded use of an anaesthetic in Australia was not at Sydney Hospital, as stated by Kappagoda,[1] but was at Dr John Belisario's rooms in Spring Street, Sydney. Belisario, with Dr Charles Nathan (honorary surgeon to Sydney Infirmary), administered ether to two patients having dental extractions on 6 June 1847, and possibly to other patients a day or two earlier.[2,3]

The first recorded use of an anaesthetic for surgery was in Launceston, Tasmania, by Dr William Russ Pugh on 7 June 1847, when he administered ether for removal of an epulis from a woman's jaw, followed by excision of a cataract from a man. Pugh published these cases in the *Australian Medical Journal* — the first medical journal in Australia, of which the *Medical Journal of Australia* is the direct descendant,[4] and which only existed for 15 months. The Editor, Dr Isaac Aaron, was one of the first surgeons at Sydney Infirmary. Ether was the sole anaesthetic available in Australia for 10 months before chloroform was introduced.

The first recorded death under ether occurred in Sydney on 9 April 1848. Two days later, on Tuesday 11 April, Nathan gave evidence in the morning at the inquest of this death and, in the afternoon, gave the first chloroform anaesthetic in Australia at Sydney Infirmary, to a young girl. The first recorded death under chloroform anaesthesia in Australia occurred on 19 July 1848 at Windsor, New South Wales.[2]

Sydney Infirmary, later Hospital, was closely involved in the early days of anaesthesia in Australia, both on site and through its staff, but cannot claim priority.

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4 Winton RR. Australian medical journals: their history and current locations. *Bull Postgrad Comm Med Univ Syd* 1969; 24: 259-261. ❑