
Ether Day: The Strange Tale of America’s Greatest Medical Discovery and the Haunted Men Who Made It is the story of the introduction of volatile anesthetic drugs into surgery and the personal story of those responsible for this major paradigm shift in medicine. It is a nontechnical account of the lives, fortunes, and misfortunes of the principals in this major event in managing pain. It centers on the use of ether in a surgical procedure at Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1846. The anesthetist was William T.G. Morton, a dentist. The operation was a success in the sense of no pain.

The book flashes back to the state of medicine and science at that time. With significant advances in understanding and practices in the mid-1800s, the management of pain was truly medieval. It is shuddering to think that one would be vicariously wheeled under the hospital top floor ceiling glass dome, for better light, and to know that the surgical procedure you are facing is with full consciousness and awareness. The successful use of ether on this occasion marked the beginning of a medical miracle.

Ether Day traces the onset of this miracle by describing the use of ether and nitrous oxide (laughing gas) in lecture, demonstrations, fairs, and early versions of “techno” parties. A number of people are brought into this saga of discovery and use, and some of them will be later claimants to recognition and rewards for their contribution. That is what the book is really all about, the personal stories of people who discovered, used, exploited, and offered to medicine, the chemicals used for the relief of pain.

The book is illustrated with early photographs and portraits of the people who played roles in the events leading up to ether day. The index is useful for recall. Ether Day is easy to read and is certainly a history that all of us in the profession should be aware of. It might be a fitting tribute to these discoverers and developers to set aside every October 16 as an “Anesthesia Day” where suitable events would pay tribute to our professional antecedents, contemporaries, and those to follow.

Lemont B. Kier, PhD
Professor of Medicinal Chemistry and Nurse Anesthesia
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia