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Historical Vignettes, Dr. John Snow

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John Snow

HISTORICAL VIGNETTES

THOMAS E. KEYS, M.A.*

DR. JOHN SNOW, most respected in Anesthesiology and the first full time anesthetist to hold an M.D. degree, was born at York, England, on June 15, 1813. Apprenticed in surgery at the age of fourteen years to Mr. William Hardcastle, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, he also studied at Newcastle Infirmary.

Snow studied anatomy in London. In 1837 he served his hospital practice at Westminster Hospital, and in 1838 he passed his examinations and became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. He also passed the examination for apothecaries and set up a general practice in London.

In 1843, Snow was awarded the degree of bachelor of medicine from the University of London; in 1844 he qualified for the degree of doctor of medicine. When, late in 1846, the news arrived from America that surgical operations could be performed without pain if patients previously had inhaled sulfuric ether, Snow quickly interested himself in the new development. He administered about 450 anesthetics yearly for an average of ten years preceding his death.

He published three articles on his experiences with sulfuric ether, and in 1847, his monograph on ether was issued.

In spite of his busy career in anesthesia, Snow's investigations on cholera are still notable. These were published in 1849, in his pamphlet, *The Mode of Communication of Cholera*. In this pamphlet he reasoned, thirty-five years before Koch's discovery of the *Vibrio comma*, that cholera is caused by a specific micro-organism.

The master work of John Snow was embodied in a magnificent monograph, *On Chloroform and Other Anaesthetics: Their Action and Administration*, published in 1858 shortly after his death. Among other notable observations, therein, Snow suggested that many deaths arising from chloroform were due to placing the responsibility of the production of anesthesia in the hands of incapable men. It is said that he knew his life would not be long, and that he therefore devoted what time he could to the preparation of this work, almost to the day of his death. On June 10, 1858, he suffered a slight stroke, and after a second attack, died on June 11, 1858.

*Professor of the History of Medicine, Mayo Graduate School of Medicine, University of Minnesota, Rochester, Minnesota 55901.

