Horace Wells Biography

Horace Wells

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Biography

The American dentist Horace Wells (1815-1848) was the first practitioner to publicly advocate the use of nitrous oxide as an anesthetic and one of the first to use an anesthetic.

Horace Wells was born in Hartford, Vt., on Jan. 21, 1815. He attended schools in Hopkinton and Walpole, N. H., and Amherst, Mass. There were no dental schools, and his education in dentistry was gained through study with several practicing dentists.

Wells was probably a traveling dentist before settling in Hartford, Conn., in 1836, where he developed a large practice. In 1838 he published *An Essay on Teeth, Comprising a Brief Description of Their Formation, Disease, and Proper Treatment*.

Wells was actively interested in finding some method of reducing the pain of dental procedures. Nitrous oxide had been discovered in the 18th century, but its potential value as an anesthetic was, for the most part, overlooked. Instead, nitrous oxide was valued because it produced a state of euphoria, and "laughing gas" parties were common in the 19th century. On Dec. 10, 1844, Wells attended one of these parties and witnessed a man under the influence of the gas injure himself and yet feel no pain. The following day Wells had a tooth pulled after inhaling the gas and felt no pain. After several experiments he arranged to demonstrate his discovery before a group of medical students and physicians in Boston, but the demonstration was not completely successful because an insufficient amount of nitrous oxide was administered. Although rebuffed by those in attendance because of this failure, Wells returned to Hartford and continued his use of the gas.

In 1846 William Morton used ether as an anesthetic and claimed credit as the discoverer of anesthesia. In 1846 Wells went to Europe to make his work known there and in 1847 presented his claim as the discoverer of anesthesia to several French scientific societies. His claim was generally acknowledged in France, and in later years it was also recognized in the United States. In 1847 Wells returned to the United States and published his claim in *A History of the Discovery of the Application of Nitrous Oxide Gas, Ether, and Other Vapors to Surgical Operations*.

Wells continued his study of anesthesia and was led to experiment with chloroform. These experiments brought on a state of mental derangement that resulted in a hostile act for which Wells was arrested. He committed suicide on Jan. 23, 1848.