

History of Medicine in Kashmir

Padre Doctor Saheb The Pioneer of Pain-free Surgery in Kashmir

Gulzar Mufti MBBS, MS, MCh, FRCS

Consultant Urological Surgeon

Non-executive Director East Sussex Health Care Commissioning Group (CCG)

Fitness to Practise Tribunal Member General Medical Council (GMC) UK

Medical Appraiser Care UK

IRM Reviewer, The Royal College of Surgeons England

Imagine living in Kashmir in 1846 AD the year when Kashmir was sold by the British to Raja Gulab Singh. If you were unlucky to have been struck by a surgical affliction such as a painful periodontal abscess with a swollen jaw, a *Hakim* would have been your first port of call. He would have sought the services of the local *Naavid* (barber) who would have initially tried a poultice impregnated with his home-made herbal mix and if necessary, made a referral to a leach-applier (*dirke-gor*) to suck out dirty blood from the phlegmon. If that didn't work he would have advocated extraction of the offending tooth and cited the old Kashmiri (nay Persian) saying, '*dard-i-dandaan, Ikhray-i-dandaan*'. (If a tooth is painful, remove it).

Hesitantly the sufferer would ask, "Will it be painful sir?" And with a convincing smile the barber would reply, "*Boz myani-jigra Yutaan neah ranj tulakh tutaan labakh ne gunj*." (*Listen my liver; endure the pain enjoy the gain*)

Already fatigued by pain and sepsis, the victim would then be held by a few able-bodied men and as the maestro pulled out the offending tooth, the sufferer's distressing shrieks would fade away into a sweaty and exhaustive slumber. With the patient breathing listlessly on the lap or bosom of a family member, the surgical craftsman would show off the offending tooth to applauding on-lookers.

The situation was no different elsewhere. In other parts of the world too surgery was a terrifying, tortuously painful and sometimes a deadly ordeal, and was therefore used as

the last resort. However, two successive scientific breakthroughs in the middle of nineteenth century the clinical use of anaesthetic agents and the acceptance of Lister's concept of antisepsis, transformed the surgical craft. On 16 October 1846, what is known as the 'Ether Day', in front of a large audience diethyl ether was used successfully by William Morton as an inhalation anaesthetic agent at Massachusetts General Hospital Boston, USA. Soon to follow was the use of chloroform, the sweet-smelling liquid in 1847 by the Scotsman Sir James Simpson for women in labour.⁽¹⁾ In the same year John Snow, a London General Practitioner explained the principles of anaesthesia practice in the publication '*On the Inhalation of the Vapour of Ether in Surgical Operations*' and pointed out the need to observe the patient carefully, and the need for someone other than the surgeon to administer the liquid and observe its effects.⁽²⁾ The term anaesthesia was derived from the Greek word *anaesthesia*, meaning loss of sensation, and thus the medical specialty of anaesthesiology was born.

Kashmiris had to wait for this miracle of pain-free surgery under anaesthetic for almost two decades, until the arrival of Dr William Jackson Elmslie, the Scottish doctor deputed by the British Christian Missionary Society (CMS) to heal and preach in Kashmir. Notwithstanding the hurdles imposed

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Correspondence:

Dr. Gulzar Mufti
Consultant Urological Surgeon
Non-executive Director East Sussex Health Care Commissioning Group (CCG)
Email: gulzar.mufti@googlegmail.com

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by the ruling Maharaja Ranbir Singh's staff, in particular his Diwan, Elmslie succeeded in establishing the first allopathic dispensary at Srinagar in a large house in the vicinity of Amira Kadal on the Eastern bank of Jehlum. He opened its doors to the public on 9 May 1865.



Dr William Jackson Elmslie MA, MD, FRCSE
(1832-1872)

As per the leave-to-enter restrictions in force by the Maharaja's Government at that time, Europeans were permitted to stay in his dominion for only a limited period during the summer. Elmslie spent five consecutive summers in Kashmir from May to October each year and passed the winter months in British India. He went back to Britain in 1870 and returned to Srinagar with his wife Margaret in 1872. During their routine return journey to India that year he died on the way at a young age of forty and was buried at Goojerat (Punjab) on 18 November. The British Medical Journal published his obituary.⁽³⁾ His widow and a friend W Thompson compiled Elmslie's memoirs and published these under the title, 'Seed Time in Kashmir'⁽⁴⁾, which provides an overview of the initiation of allopathic school of Medicine in Kashmir.

One week after starting seeing patients, on 17 May 1865 Dr Elmslie wrote: '... Excised a cystic tumour from a young man. Having explained the object and effects of chloroform I asked him if he wished me to give it to him. After some

slight hesitation he consented. In all probability this is the first time a native Kashmiri has been anaesthetised in the valley with chloroform.'

This is the first recorded surgical procedure undertaken in Kashmir under an anaesthetic. Elmslie's note also exemplifies the principle of informed consent in surgical practice, something which we are not very good at even today. The procedure was apparently successful as per his subsequent writing of 26 May 1865: *'The young man from whom I extirpated the cystic tumour, called today to show himself. He presented me with two rupees as a token of his gratitude. I merely touched them and returned them...'*

The successful albeit nervous beginning of Elmslie's pain-free surgical exploits on Kashmiris is evident from his thoughts of 8 June 1865, *'With the aid of chloroform removed another tumour in the forenoon. Have great reason for heartfelt thankfulness to God, in as much as hitherto nothing untoward has happened with respect to my medical work.'* A week later he remarked, *'With the aid of chloroform removed a large staphyloma. The people are becoming acquainted with the fact that there is a medicine that takes away the pain by making them sleep, and readily take it when it is required.'*

The first surgical mortality was possibly his fourth patient, on 27 July 1865 when he wrote, *"In the afternoon performed Chopart's operation for caries of the bones of tarsus. The patient was a girl whose mother and father were present during the operation. Chloroform was administered to the patient, who went off very quickly. In operating, my difficulties are legion, for I have everything to do myself."*

After his first yearly exit from the Valley in October 1865 he returned in May 1866 to find that the house he had rented was no longer available but he moved into a different accommodation close to zero bridge and resumed his clinical activities under a tent but his intractable surgical itch continued, as evidenced by the disappointment in his note of 14 May 1866, *"My lithotomy case ran away this morning, so I am baulked of my operation."*

Bladder stone used to be a very common affliction those days. He did not have to wait long as he had another lithotomy case lined up for 23 May. Sadly, that patient died two days later which he recorded in the following words, *"Today my lithotomy patient died from gradual sinking..."*

The patient probably bled to death or died of sepsis, because the concept of antiseptics was unknown to mankind at that point in time.

Regardless of the setback Elmslie continued with his surgical adventures. He records several successful bladder stone removals, of which one weighed 3 ounces and 6 drachms (equivalent to 175 G), cataract removal by depression method, ectropion surgery, removal of a cystic tumour from the eyelid, removal of a fibrous tumour from the breast and uvulectomy for snoring. In a letter to his mother dated 11 August 1866 he wrote, "*Many of my patients come from a great distance; and never a day passes without one or two surgical operations.*"

The rest of the memoirs are a collection of his letters to his mother, his friends and people in authority within and outside the CMS in which he seems very satisfied about his medical and surgical achievements but expresses his frustrations repeatedly with regard to the lack of progress on the evangelic front.

Our forefathers knew Dr Elmslie as *Padre doctor Saheb*. During his short domicile in Kashmir he learnt fluent Kashmiri and Persian and produced a Kashmiri-English Dictionary which is still in print today. He also published a scientific paper on Kangri Cancer⁽⁵⁾, in which he states that like Kashmiris, Britons and Italians, also used portable braziers for body warming in cold weather.⁽⁶⁾ William

Elmslie brought the Western allopathic system of Medicine to our motherland and it was he who introduced the concept of pain-free, under-anaesthetic surgery to the people of Kashmir.

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