

Anaesthetic Deaths in Colonial New Zealand—the legacy of Chloroform

The unusual introduction of chloroform into New Zealand by a general merchant, arriving some weeks ahead of any news of the use of chloroform as an alternative to ether is explained. The first administration of chloroform in the colony at Auckland on Tuesday 27 June 1848 and its introduction into midwifery during 1849 and dentistry the following year are described.

The earliest reported anaesthetic-related death in New Zealand occurred in 1864 and between that occurrence and 31 December 1909 a total of 130 anaesthetic related deaths have been located, all but three being 'chloroform deaths'.

An analysis of these anaesthetic deaths reveals a dramatic increase in anaesthetic related mortality that commenced in the final five years of the nineteenth century. The factors relating to this increased mortality including resuscitation methods, qualification and experience of the administrators are described.

By contrast the use of chloroform for suicidal purposes in the colony never became popular whereas strychnine and arsenic were the most frequent agents used for that purpose throughout the colonial era. The criminal uses of chloroform for robbery murder and rape were infrequent.