

The History Of The Dunedin Department Of Anaesthetics

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The history of the development of anaesthetics in the Dunedin Department is conveniently divided into five different periods starting with the early days of anaesthesia at the time of the hospital's inception, 1852, leading up to 1900; the second period when the first anaesthetists were appointed extends from 1900 to 1950; the third period, termed the Ritchie years, covers the time that Dr John Ritchie was Director of the Department, 1950 to 1974; followed by the Baker years, 1975 to 1992 when Professor Baker was Chairman of the Department; and finally the period described as more recent years.

Patient records from the 1800s give little information about anaesthetic techniques other than such comments as the patient was chloroformed, or ether administered, and it was not until the appointment of the first honorary anaesthetist, Dr Russell Ritchie, in 1906 that nitrous oxide machines were mentioned. The next significant event historically was the appointment of the first part time lecturer in anaesthesia in the Otago Medical School in 1928, Dr Marion Whyte, who continued as the senior anaesthetist until her retirement in 1948. She was replaced by Dr John Ritchie, who in 1950 became the Department's first fulltime Director and senior lecturer in Anaesthesia. Dr Ritchie established the first department with office accommodation for staff, tutorial room and maintenance workshop facilities. He was a dedicated teacher who had a career long crusade to simplify the anaesthetic machine and make anaesthesia safer.

In 1968 the department moved to purpose built space in the new clinical services building adjoining the operating theatres and recovery room. The first whole time University senior lecturer, Dr MTS Roberts was appointed in 1973, while on the retirement of Dr John Ritchie in 1974, the University established a Chair of Anaesthesia, with Professor AB (Barry) Baker as the Foundation Professor. Professor Baker with boundless enthusiasm recruited new senior lecturers and research staff and soon had a research laboratory functioning. In 1981 the Department moved to more spacious accommodation in the new ward block adjacent to the new Intensive Care Unit which became the Department's responsibility.

Following Professor Baker's departure at the end of 1992, the University was unsuccessful in securing a replacement. The final period covers the progress of the department in more recent years.