



Anaesthesia News

No. 251 June 2008

The Newsletter of the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland.

ISSN 0959-2962

World Congress in Cape Town

**Preparing for a
consultant interview**

Film review – Awake

The History Page

The Development of Anaesthesia in Serbia

The history of the beginnings of anaesthesiology in our country dates from 1945 when two British anaesthesiologists, Russell Davies (East Grinstead) and Patrick Shackleton (Southampton) came to Belgrade, together with a group of plastic surgeons.

In 1945, against the prevailing political background, Sir Harold Gilles discovered there was a large number of the Yugoslavian population injured in the war who could be helped by plastic surgery. There was little or no expertise in this branch of surgery in Serbia at the time, so he set out to achieve two things. Firstly, to ask the newly formed United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to set up a training program in Serbia and secondly to persuade the Ministry of Health of the United Kingdom to provide a teaching team for this program. It was soon agreed that the main plastic surgery units in England at that time could provide rotating teams which would successively visit Belgrade to undertake this mission.

By late 1945 a complete British Army Field Hospital was flown from Italy to Belgrade and installed in the Belgrade Trade Union Hospital (Bolnica Trgovacke Omladine) with a capacity 120 beds,

which was at the time unoccupied. It had two operating theatres which were to be staffed by one senior domestic surgeon and four surgical trainees. The British input began with the arrival of Mr. John Barron (plastic surgeon) and Dr Patrick Shackleton (anaesthetist) to Belgrade. The Serbian team consisted of Dr Ivo Arneri (plastic surgeon) and Dr Sever Kovacev, who was chosen to administer anaesthetics. Dr Russell arrived in Belgrade the following year and both British anaesthetists began work on obtaining anaesthetic equipment, introducing up to date anaesthetics into surgical practice, and educating young doctors in the field of anaesthesiology. Dr. Sever Kovacev, who later became Professor of Anaesthesiology at the Novi Sad University, was their first student.

These first students of Dr Davies and Dr Shackleton became in turn the first local teachers of anaesthesiology in the region and it can be said that all Serbian anaesthesiology developed from the work of these two British anaesthetists.

Dr Shackleton and Dr Davies carried out their education plan on a larger scale when they started organizing anaesthesiology training courses for all hospitals in the country with the aim



Dr Russell Davies with the Yugoslav medal, pictured in his garden in Winchester.

of demonstrating modern techniques and equipment. They discovered that there was a factory in the country which produced ammonium carbonate as a waste product. Dr Davies persuaded UNRRA to agree to buy the plant for nitrous oxide production for the British Oxygen Company at a cost of £40,000. He felt that this plant would help the economy of the country, there being no

manufacturer of nitrous oxide in Europe south of the UK at the time.

Dr Davies also planned a National Blood Transfusion service based on his knowledge of the system applied in Britain. He submitted a paper to the Ministry of Health, and although it took five years to come to fruition, a Blood Transfusion Laboratory and the system to support it were developed along these lines.

Patrick Shackleton and Russell Davies remained in our country for three years and during that period educated five Serbian anaesthesiologists. On their return to Britain they continued to teach, and many well-known British anaesthetists were trained by Patrick Shackleton and Russell Davies.

Very close ties between British and Serbian anaesthesiologists have existed continuously from these beginnings in the post-war period up to the present day. Dr Shackleton remained an active participant in all events that took place or were related to our specialty. He campaigned for a national association of anaesthesiologists and the establishment of an award in the field of anaesthesiology. It is to their credit,



Dr Patrick Shackleton, pictured while President of AAGBI (1967-69)

coupled with the diligence of the first Serbian anaesthesiologists, that a relevant Article of Law was adopted excluding all other than qualified physicians to administer anaesthesia. This law was passed in the 1950s when many European countries still lacked laws regulating administration of anaesthesia. From that time the population of anaesthesiologists in Serbia grew rapidly and at present there are approximately 450 qualified anaesthesiologists.

During the years that followed we were convinced that the history of Serbian anaesthesiology must be remembered, so we sought ways to keep it alive and pass it on to future generations.

The idea of organizing the Anglo Serbian Days of Anaesthesia originates from the time of Professor Stanley Feldman's visit to Belgrade in 1987. On the professor's return to London we exchanged letters and initiated proceedings to bring the idea into existence. Around this time I went to London and met John Zorab, who had been a student of Dr Davies and Dr Shackleton. John Zorab gave us great assistance in the organization of our first two meetings. From that time forward John and I maintained a regular correspondence right up to his death.

The first meeting was held in 1988. It was our wish that our first two teachers would be present on this occasion but, unfortunately, Patrick Shackleton had already passed away, and Russell Davies was too unwell to attend the event. In a letter addressed to us all he evoked the first days of anaesthesia in our country. He was awarded a supreme Yugoslav medal which was received on his behalf by John Zorab, who at the time was President of the World Federation of Anaesthesiologists.

The nineties were dire times for our country. Unfortunately meetings and events of this nature were unfeasible. However, during this period our friends from England did not forget us and a



John Zorab

number of our Serbian colleagues went to England to further their education or to emigrate. Even the exceptionally unfavourable political climate and the bombing of Serbia in 1999 did not make us falter in our conviction that due recognition had to be given to the two exceptional English doctors who fathered the beginnings of our profession.

This year we plan to organize our fourth meeting, once again in October.

The opinion of all colleagues who have taken part in these meetings so far is that these should continue. Tradition begets substance. The meeting planned for this year will be dedicated to John Zorab. Along with Professor Feldman, John Zorab was the initiator of the concept of Anglo Serbian days of anaesthesia. It is our intention to remember John Zorab in the way we do Patrick Shackleton and Russell Davies. John truly upheld the idea that all anaesthesiologists from around the world should comprise one universal family. The forthcoming meeting will also be an occasion for us to pay tribute to him for all the help and friendship he unselfishly extended throughout the years.

Prof. Dragan Vucovic,

President of Serbian Association of Anaesthesiologists and Intensivists