History of anaesthesia in Colombia: periods of development

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The written history of anaesthesia is dominated by the developments in English-speaking parts of the world; there is little written or read on the developments in Latin America. In this editorial, based on a qualitative historical research,1 we present a brief overview of six historical periods of the development of anaesthesia in Colombia.

First period: pre-anaesthetic era (before October 16, 1846)

It is known that surgical experiments were few during this period, and that the techniques for controlling pain were empirical. Surgical procedures were carried out with the use of substances such as opium, mandrake, and other remedies popular at the time.

In this period, the most relevant events were those related to increase in health institutions, hospitals, and universities, where medical attention and experimental surgery started to develop. These institutions later became essential sites for the development of the speciality in Colombia.

In common with the rest of the world, following the first successful public demonstration of ether anaesthesia by William T. G. Morton at Massachusetts General Hospital (North America), October 16, 1846 marked the historical birth of anaesthesia in Colombia.

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Second period: first steps (1846–1913)

The timeline for this period continues until 1913, the year of the Second National Medical Congress in which themes related to anaesthesia were presented. The anaesthesia-related procedures were not recognized as medical activities.

Despite anaesthesia’s lack of recognition among the health professions, doctors and odontologists produced graduate theses, case reports, and experiments with anaesthesia in hospitals and universities. Rudimentary research papers describing anaesthetic techniques also started to appear; these works are recognized in the region as the first scientific contributions to the speciality.

By the end of this period, for the first time, anaesthesia ascended as a medical profession in Colombia since previously the Sisters of Charity, and non-professional personnel were responsible for administering anaesthesia. In this era, the first ‘chloroformist’, Dr Isaac Rodríguez, practiced in San José Hospital in the city of Bogotá.

Third period: pre-institutionalization (1913–1949)

This historical period of ‘pre-institutionalization’ ran from 1913 until September 23, 1949, when the Colombian Society of Anaesthetists (Sociedad de Anestesiastas de Colombia) was founded. The organization steered the publication of papers and graduate theses on themes relating to anaesthesia. These publications built on the work of the previous period and showed the growing interest in anaesthesia as a technique for controlling pain and permitting surgical procedures.

In 1943, the ‘Pioneer of Pioneers’ of anaesthesia in Colombia—the student, and later doctor, Juan Marín Osorio—appeared on the medical stage in San José Hospital in Bogotá. He set the trend for the increase in medical professionals dedicated exclusively to the administration of anaesthesia2 (Fig. 1).

During this period, the first courses in techniques for the administration of anaesthesia were organized. Owing to a lack of interest among medical students, doctors, and nurses, personnel from outside of medicine also attended these courses. These non-medical graduates became responsible in large part for the development of the speciality up until the fifth decade of the 20th century.

Dr Marín Osorio created the coat of arms of the Colombian Society of Anaesthesiology, an emblem that has become well known throughout Colombia.

Later during this period, a gradual entrance of medically qualified ‘chloroformists’ into the operating theatre started, and this saw the displacement of non-professional anaesthetists. In addition, this also led to conflicts between surgeons and the ‘chloroformists’, because the latter were seen as an intrusion into the surgical space and were also recognized as the second professional responsible for attending the patient.

The first reanimation techniques that attempted to resolve heart and respiratory failure during the administration of anaesthesia were described. Juan E. Martinez (‘Juancho Martínez’) appeared as the other doctor dedicated exclusively to the administration of anaesthesia in Marly Clinic in Bogotá. From 1948 to 1950, Dr Perry P. Volpitto, professor and head of the Department of Anaesthesia of the University of Georgia, worked in Colombia as part of a medical mission presided by Dr George H. Humphreys; Dr Volpitto set the standard for changes in the course and practice of anaesthesia in the country.

Fourth period: institutionalization and pre-professionalization (1949–1959)

The term pre-professionalization is used because the Colombian Association of Faculties of Medicine (ASCOFAME in its Spanish acronym) was not founded until March 18, 1959. This organization defined the standards for various specialities, including anaesthesia. The period is also identified as the time of institutionalization because, during this period, with the foundation of the Colombian Society of Anaesthesiology, the organization of the speciality with a clear differentiation from other surgical specialities began. Some of the most important events include:

- The national and regional societies gained legal recognition.
- The Departments of Anaesthesiology and Reanimation started to appear in universities and hospitals. These
entities began to develop healthcare and academic activities that contributed to the gradual consolidation of the speciality.

- The first post-graduate programmes in anaesthesiology were established (1957–8).

- The First Colombian Congress on Anaesthesia took place on August 26, 1952.

- In 1954, medical graduates were invited to attend a course on anaesthesia taught by Dr Gustavo Delgado Sierra in San Juan de Dios Hospital.

Fig 2 First journal of anaesthesia published in Colombia, directed by Dr Gustavo Delgado (1954). Reproduced from 1 with permission from the Colombian Society of Anaesthesia.
In 1954, the journal Anestesia appeared in Colombia (Fig. 2).

Fifth period: professionalization (1959–1973)

With the Foundation of ASCOFAME (1959), guidelines and regulations for the teaching of medicine to undergraduates, and norms for post-graduate studies, were established. The following are some of the most outstanding events of the period:

- The Committee for the Specialty of Anaesthesia was created in 1956 and it certified Colombia’s first 65 anaesthetists.
- Anaesthesia made great leaps in its growth and development. Post-graduate studies were encouraged and degrees awarded. Annual congresses were organized and the standards were set for the organization of anaesthesia services.
- Anaesthesia was being seen as a profession.
- The congresses, with their ‘pre-congress classes’, promoted continuing education.
- Trade conventions solidified the administrative structure of the Society as a decentralized collegiate organization.
- Discussions surrounding minimum requirements and academic standards in under- and post-graduate programmes favoured the consolidation of anaesthesia as a speciality.
- On August 20, 1973, the 12th Latin American Congress, the 7th General Assembly of the Latin American Confederation of Anaesthesia Societies (CLASA in its Spanish acronym), the 11th Colombian Congress of Anaesthesiology, and the First Special Meeting of the Caribbean Area were all held in Bogotá.
- The Colombian Journal of Anaesthesiology (Revista Colombiana de Anestesiología) was founded in 1973 and established itself nationally and internationally.

We decided to use the ‘Social Security Crisis’ of 1973, which threatened the very existence of the Society, as the final incident of this period. The Society would almost disappear but later reorganized itself in 1976 to gain new momentum.

Sixth period: consolidation and further development (1973–2000)

Here we highlight chronologically the most relevant events from this period:

- Owing to effects of the Social Security Crisis and the great incidents from this era, Colombian anaesthesiology came to be considered one of the most important scientific and medical societies in the country and in the Latin American region.
- The 10 Seminars on Education in Anaesthesia, the first of which took place in 1974, have marked further development of anaesthesia in Colombia.
- The establishment of the minimal safety standards and educational and awareness programmes have increased the quality of anaesthesia to levels of excellence.
- Bill 6 was passed in 1991. The law is one-of-a-kind in Colombia for medical societies and in Latin America for anaesthesia, and became one of the pillars of the Society and the practice of the speciality.
- The Special Fund for Mutual Aid against Lawsuits (FEPASDE in its Spanish acronym) was created in order to advise professionals facing legal proceedings. Initially, it worked solely with anaesthetists, but now serves all healthcare professionals. FEPASDE has become a leader in legal consultation and is a basis for the economic solidity of the Colombian Society of Anaesthesiology and Reanimation (S.C.A.R.E.).

In conclusion, we sincerely hope that the readers of this article will appreciate how the developments in the speciality of anaesthesia in Colombia have kept pace with the developed parts of the world. With the establishment of FEPASDE, the Colombian anaesthetists have also shown an important example of national leadership in medicolegal consultation of all healthcare workers within and outside the speciality of Anaesthesia.

Declaration of interest

None declared.

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