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Arabs and Anesthesia

Being an obstetric anesthesiologist, I feel obligated to write a little more on the contributions of the Arabs to both anesthesia and obstetrics. First, in anesthesia, the Arabs described in detail the pharmacology of important narcotics such as opium and other central nervous system depressants such as hyoscyamus and hashish (Khairallal 1942). Burton (1886 A.D.) stated that "anesthetics have been used in surgery throughout the East for centuries before ether and chloroform became the fashion in the civilized West. In a Treatise on the Canon of Medicine by Gruner it is stated by Avicenna under the article 8I4 ANESTHETICS: "If it is desirable to get a person unconscious quickly, without him being harmed, add sweet smelling moss to the wine, or lignum aloes.

If it is desirable to procure a deeply unconscious state, to able the pain to be borne which is involved in painful applications to a member. Place darnel-water into the wine, or administer fumitory, opiuium, hyoscyamus (half dram doses of each); nutmeg, crude aloes-wood (4 grains of each). Add this to the wine, and take as much as is necessary for the purpose. Or, boil black hyoscyamus in water, with mandragore bark, until it becomes red. Add this to the wine."

The Arabs also introduced "the Soporific Sponge" which was commonly used for anesthesia in the middle ages. The sponge was soaked with aromatics and narcotics to be sucked and then held under the nostril to provide anesthesia prior to surgery (Keys 1971).

Avicenna wrote more than 1,000 years ago about the effect of pain on ventilation: "Pain dissipates the bodily strength and interferes with the normal functions of the organs. The respiratory organs are inhibited from drawing in air, and consequently the act of breathing is interfered with, and the respiration becomes intermittent, rapid, or altogether unnatural in rhythm" (Gruner 1930).

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