

Comment

Dr Mitchell Henry O'Sullivan's Bag

Dr Mitchell Henry O'Sullivan's (1892–1972) obstetric bag (Fig. 1) is a time capsule containing instruments and items that document the obstetrical practice of a country doctor in Victoria, Australia in the years between the two world wars. In 1999 his son, Dr David O'Sullivan donated the obstetric bag and contents to the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Museum. The bag is a standard Gladstone bag that contained the instruments and various items used for the care of the mother and baby at delivery. Items of particular interest include the amber chloroform drop bottle that was used in the early 1920s which predates the cobalt blue bottles used in later years. There are also early examples of suture material that includes a box of silk worm gut and vials of catgut. The suture material could be used for the suturing of the perineum. The bag also includes various components for direct blood transfusion with a box of needles and the brown tubing that was connected to the donor and the recipient.

Instruments used in the care of the baby include the manual paediatric sucker, which enabled the doctor to remove mucus from the baby's mouth. The sucker differs from the current instruments in that it divides into two parts and has a receptacle plugged with cotton wool. The cotton wool swab prevented the mucus from entering the mouth of the resuscitator. The cord scissors are of an American style pattern and 'the curved cutting edges prevent the cord from slipping'.¹ 'The portable baby scales are a compact spring scale graduated in fourths of 1 pound'¹ and was used at home deliveries. The small portable steriliser, circa 1907, is a rare example of the equipment used for the sterilisation of hypodermic needles. The forceps that were found in the bag

are one pair of Neville–Barnes with axis traction and a pair of Simpson's obstetrical forceps (straight pattern) (Fig. 2).

Dr Mitchell O'Sullivan

Dr Mitchell O'Sullivan (Fig. 3)¹ graduated from Melbourne University in 1916. He held residencies at the Alfred Hospital and at the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. Dr O'Sullivan was a Captain in the Australian Army Medical Division during World War 1. In 1919 after he returned from the war he married Margaret and took over a medical practice in Casterton, Victoria.

Dr O'Sullivan was known for being generous and would often forgo payment for his services. David O'Sullivan, in an interview held in the oral history College Collection, recounted the tale of his father dryly commenting that; 'Mary [a patient] had a baby and her grandmother hasn't paid for her mother yet!' Dr O'Sullivan kept no records of appointments and very few patient notes. Some financial records exist that document the first 7 years of his practice that show he delivered approximately 400 babies.

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References

- 1 Sharp & Smith. Catalog of surgical instruments equipment and supplies, 25th edn. Chicago: Sharp & Smith, circa 1932.



Figure 1 Dr O'Sullivan's obstetric bag. Source: Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Museum.



Figure 2 Obstetric forceps on left Simpson's short pattern on right Neville-Barnes with axis traction.



Figure 3 Dr Mitchell Henry O'Sullivan in army uniform circa 1918.