

Commentary

William Smellie's obstetrical forceps

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) museum holds an extensive collection of early obstetric forceps. The most significant is a pair of William Smellie's straight forceps (see front cover image) dated circa 1750. These forceps provide a tangible and direct link with the development of obstetrics as a specialty and the training of Australians and New Zealanders in Britain and Ireland and through the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

William Smellie (1697–1763) (Fig. 1) is regarded, alongside William Hunter (1718–1783), as one of the most outstanding and influential teachers of obstetrics. Smellie's contribution was to teach his students through practical demonstrations using patients and lecturing. Smellie published his *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* in 1751. It was in this first chapter entitled 'Mechanism of Parturition' that 'here, for the first time in the history of midwifery, we have a clear and coherent description of the movements of the head in relation to the pelvis during birth'.¹

Bryan Hibbard, in his book *The Obstetrician's Armamentarium: Historical Obstetric Instruments and Their Inventors*, provides the closest description of the forceps in the collection. 'The blades of Smellie's early forceps, which were slender and broadest near their tips, were made of iron, covered with leather, and lubricated with hog's lard.² The hog's lard was presumably applied at the time of delivering the baby. Remnants of leather can still be seen on the handles and the blades. 'The leather wrapping of the blades was probably adopted by Smellie when he discarded his wooden forceps. The object was similar – to make them more silent in use, and warmer and kindlier to the women's tissues in application'¹ Many visitors, seeing the forceps on display in the museum, are surprised to see a leather covered instrument that could not be sterilised properly. The blades are now discoloured through age.

'Smellie contributed to the improvement and the greater usefulness of the forceps by shortening and lightening the whole instrument, by shortening the handles in particular, by inventing his "lock", by applying the pelvic curve, and by formulating rules for its use'.¹ This summary of Smellie's

improvements to forceps design can be clearly demonstrated by looking at the object as a primary source of information. It is important to preserve these early medical instruments to illustrate the significant advances in medicine and medical practice.

Smellie's forceps were first displayed in the John Green Room at the former College House at 8 La Trobe Street, Melbourne in 1956. In 1998 the forceps were conserved as the leather was slowly deteriorating leaving only remnants remaining on the blades and handles. The conservation treatment has stabilised the corrosion and the forceps are now stored in a specially designed acid-free box lined with calico and a perspex cover.

The care, storage and conservation of this pair of obstetric forceps in an Australian museum reflects the high regard and significance in which William Smellie's work is held. The RANZCOG library also holds a copy of William Smellie's treatise 'A sett of anatomical tables, with explanations, and an abridgement, of the practice of midwifery with a view to illustrate a treatise on that subject, and collection of cases' (Fig. 2).

'With all respect to the Chamberlens, it was Smellie who in great measure first taught us how to use the forceps, and who thereby gave British midwifery the pre-eminent position in relation to the instrument which it has ever since maintained'.¹

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References

- 1 Johnstone RW. *William Smellie. The Master of British Midwifery*. Edinburgh: E & S Livingstone, 1952.
- 2 Hibbard B. *The Obstetrician's Armamentarium: Historical Obstetric Instruments and Their Inventors*. California: Norman Publishing, 2000.



Figure 1 Portrait of William Smellie.

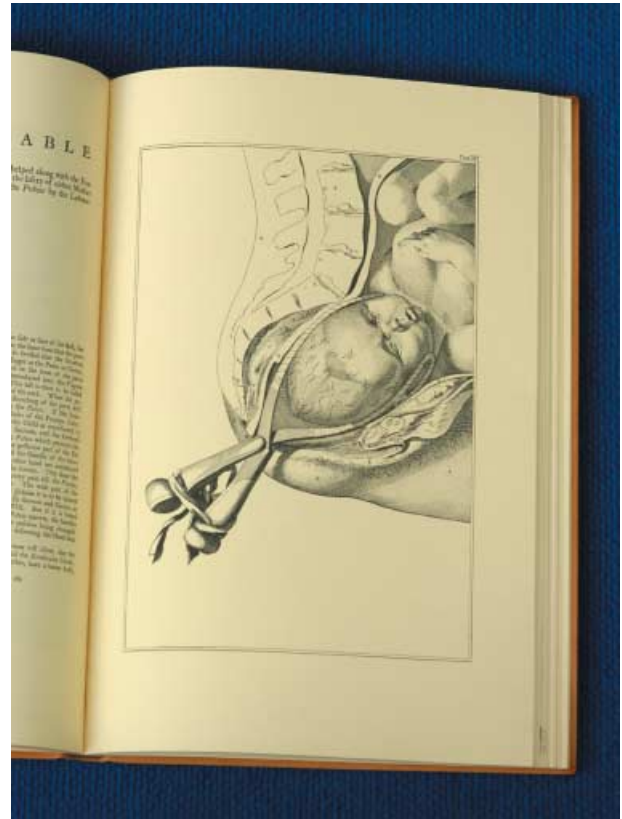


Figure 2 A sett of anatomical tables, with explanations, and an abridgement, of the practice of midwifery with a view to illustrate a treatise on that subject, and collection of cases.