PETITION TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

Who should get the credit for the discovery or introduction of surgical anesthesia? How should that person or persons be recognized and rewarded? Those were the questions put to the United States Congress 140 years ago. The claimants for priority were Charles T. Jackson, William T.G. Morton, and Horace Wells. Later Crawford W. Long also made his claim. Each person had some reason to be involved in the ether controversy and to advance his claim of priority. Each person had also garnered the support of many individuals and groups. There were 'public trials' in newspapers, tracts and books. Claims and counterclaims were abundant over a period of many years.

How could the Congress handle such a controversial problem? Why of course, refer it to a committee! And now which one?

Even the Massachusetts General Hospital had its own interest at stake. Most of the people at MGH and the Massachusetts Medical Society supported the claims of William T.G. Morton. To advance the cause of their position, the petition in the centerfold was drafted and sent to Washington. A few lithograph copies of the original petition exist. One of them is in the office of Richard J. Kitz, M.D. at the Massachusetts General Hospital. A second copy, from which this reproduction was made, is in the Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology in Park Ridge, Illinois.
Among the numerous petitioners were many prominent people who held great reputations around the world. John C. Warren was the first signer and was the surgeon on October 16, 1846 when Gilbert Abbott received sulphuric ether from Morton for his operation at Massachusetts General Hospital. Clearly such important people petitioning the Congress should prevail in their claim, which was that "William T.G. Morton first proved to the world that ether would produce insensibility to the pain of surgical operations... Wherefore, they respectfully ask a recognition by Congress of his services to his country and mankind." But their petition, presented at the Second Session of the Thirty-Second Congress, did not carry the day.

The controversy had been referred to the Committee on Military Affairs but could not be resolved. Legislators debated and considered referring it to the Committee on Patents as requested by a committee member, the Honorable Truman Smith, Connecticut. This request was flawed by a conflict of interest since he was counsel to Elizabeth W. Wells, widow of Horace Wells. Morton had obtained a patent for his secret compound he called "Letheon" but under pressure revealed it to be sulphuric ether. Wells had not obtained a patent for nitrous oxide.
This undated letter, likely to your Uncle, reads:

"Dear Uncle, 

I am writing to you from my home in the [Redacted]. The weather here is [Redacted], but the food is quite good. I am enjoying my time here and hope to get a chance to visit you in the near future. 

Yours truly,

[Signature]"

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"Member of [Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]"
Political pressures caused Congress to consider re-referral to the Committee on Military Affairs. However, there were now so many legislators who had taken strong positions that the President of the Senate appointed a “Special Committee to consider the subject of the discovery of anaesthetic agents.” Among the members was Truman Smith!

Delay followed delay and the Thirty-Second Congress adjourned on March 3, 1853. Morton did not receive his long sought recognition but had spent enormous sums defending it. The proposed reward of $100,000 had vanished from his grasp forever.
REFERENCES

Raper, Howard Riley. Man against pain, the epic of anesthesia. New York, Prentice-Hall, 1945, pp.134-141

Rice, Nathan P. Trials of a public benefactor, as illustrated in the discovery of etherization. New York, Pudney and Russell, 1858, pp.354-373

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