

Physician test thyself

BC4's *Medical Mavericks* (Wednesdays in February) told of scientists who experimented on themselves. The series started with anaesthesia. The narrator, Michael Mosley, was described as a 'former doctor'; in the course of the programme he inhaled nitrous oxide, in the footsteps of Humphry Davy, and got quite merry.

It is quite extraordinary that Davy, who also discovered potassium, sodium and boron and invented the miner's lamp, never realized the surgical potential of nitrous oxide. He and his friends inhaled gallons of the stuff; they put ecstasy users in the shade. But as Mosley recounted, Davy's intake was far less varied than James Simpson's. Dissatisfied with the side-effects of the then popular anaesthetic ether, he had his dinner party guests sniff acetone, carbon disulphide and all manner of foul things until, almost as an afterthought, he got what he wanted when they tried chloroform and all fell in a heap under the dinner table.

Thus one of the indisputably most important advances in medicine took off. And I am, of course, completely unbiased. Not an ethics committee application form in sight, and surgeons could take their time and patients survived. Later on, Freud abused shedloads of cocaine but missed its use as a local anaesthetic. That was left to

his ophthalmological friend Karl Koller when he put cocaine on his eye and then poked it with a sharp knife. Freud, meanwhile, preferred to hand down to mankind the enormous benefits of psychoanalysis. The programme omitted another important self-experiment with local anaesthesia, in which August Bier gave the first spinal anaesthetic to his assistant.

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First experience with the remaining component of modern anaesthesia, muscle relaxants, was recounted by the son of the first person to be given curare under controlled conditions, rather than in fights between warring tribes in the South American jungle. His fellow experimenters were so engrossed with their various measuring instruments that they failed to notice that he had almost stopped breathing.

The programme was somewhat spoiled by Mosley's relentless chirpiness. We don't want po-faced solemnity in television science, but it was all a bit populist. The device of using soft focus while Mosley was under the influence of nitrous oxide was understandable but unnecessary. Slow motion while he was walking along corridors simply getting from one place to another was unnecessary and pointless, and served only to remind me of the late lamented *Green Wing*.

The other programmes in the series are about vaccines, diet, and lastly infections. I was pleased to see that the last programme will end with the story of how Dr Barry Marshall proved that stomach ulcers were not the result of stress and blood groups by drinking a broth of *Helicobacter* and getting very ill.

Above all, what these tales show is how advances can come not from committees, targeted research, and millions of pounds, but from simple curiosity, determination and courage. And how they can be held up just as much by failure to see the obvious as by the obstinacy of the medical establishment. **BJHM**

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