

# KNOCKOUT TEAM

**A one-man practice started half a century ago has grown to become Tasmania's biggest specialist medical team, reports MIKE WARD**

**A** SCOTTISH surgeon named Liston is claimed to have been able to hack off a limb and stitch up the stump in under a minute.

That was in the 1840s, when surgery with no anaesthesia was 99 per cent speed and 1 per cent success.

Medical science has come a long way from when surgical pain relief was a good belt of bad brandy and maybe a bullet to bite on.

Modern anaesthesia is what it says without sensation and, from the patient's perspective, lightning fast.

About 50,000 Tasmanians had an anaesthetic of some sort last year,

and immobile – conditions without which most operations could not be performed, no matter how swift or skilled the surgeon.

There have always been risks from the first use of ether in the 1840s, through chloroform in the 1900s to present day drugs and gases that make it possible to operate even on the unborn and frailest of the elderly.

But the dangers nowadays for Australian children and adults in reasonable health are minimal.

"We are at the high end of sophistication," Martyn said.

"Ours is a very science and technology-based specialty but it

**“The workload was tremendous and that could mean running two anaesthetics at once in adjoining operating theatres”**

making the state's hospitals quite a bit busier than its airports in terms of "take-offs and landings".

That's how anaesthetist Mike Martyn likes to describe the business of getting people from A to B with their lights out.

"The challenge for us is that the 'aircraft' might not have been well maintained, there's no GPS or weather forecast and a surgeon is pulling out the hydraulics," he said.

A patient under general anaesthetic is not merely asleep but in a state where the body's cellular activity is slowed.

A general, Martyn says, makes a person unconscious, insensate

requires dealing with individual patient variations that make it an art as well.

"It's not just knowledge. There's skill and judgment avoidance of problems and knowing when to bail out."

The Tasmanian medical practice to which Martyn belongs makes a strong claim to leading the country in advancing that art.

Hobart Anaesthetic Group, a collection of 25 anaesthetists, forms Tasmania's biggest private specialist medical team.

Its huge "operation behind the operations" last year dispensed more than 27,000 anaesthetic services to 20,000 or so individual patients.



**VETERAN:** Tom Thomson with a picture of himself, taken in 1946-47 when a member of the Royal Army Medical Corp, at the start of his medical career. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

The group as an entity supplies most of Tasmania's private hospital anaesthesia and a good share of the public system's as well.

Its origins go back 53 years to when a Scottish doctor with a "bad chest" was advised to "go and live in a better climate".

Tom Thomson, now 91, arrived in Tasmania from Sheffield, England, to find he was one of only two qualified anaesthetists in the state.

"We were a pretty rare breed," Thompson said.

"The workload was tremendous and that could mean running two anaesthetics at once in adjoining operating theatres.

"You were permanently on call. Whatever the hour, as soon as you lifted the phone you were committed."

Within three years, he'd had enough. But the Tasmanian air

had cleared his lungs and the trout fishing had him hooked.

He defied the system and went private. When he retired in 1985, there were five in the practice. By 2005, there were 13.

The 24th and 25th associates, Simon Morphet and Jenny Lain, joined in January this year.

The anaesthetist ranks comprise 18 men and seven women ranging in age from newcomers in their early 30s to 68-year-old Bob Bown, with expertise spanning the globe of sedations, blocks and anaesthetics across almost 100 procedures.

But the strength is not in the numbers, says Martyn, who describes the practice's success as a "causal ambiguity" meaning "it is difficult to determine what actual key factors have led to us developing into such a successful practice".

Practice manager Libby Stanick, in