

Francisco Javier Villanueva: The First Administration of General Anaesthesia in ChileDr Veronica Varas and Dr Juan Pablo Alvarez[†][†]Correspondence email: jpabloalvarez@gmail.com

“Brilliant success of chloroform. . .”*

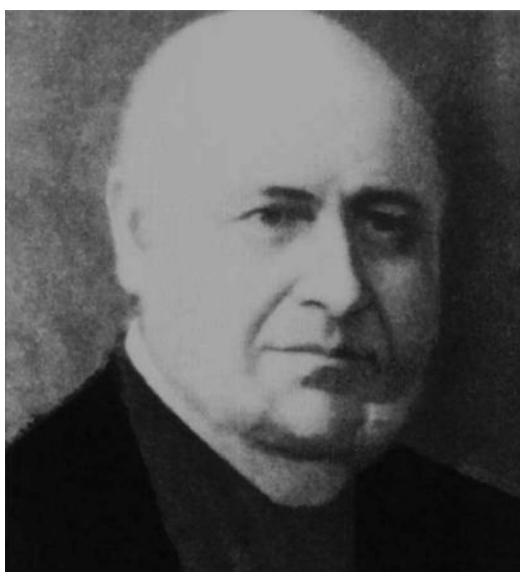
*Article published in *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* on 23 October, 1848.

Figure 1 – Dr Francisco Javier Villanueva. (Tromben Corvalán et al., p. 46.⁴ Dirección de Sanidad de la Armada de Chile. Cortesía del Dr. Samuel Barros Recabal, Hospital FUSAT)

Anaesthesia has long been a fundamental part of medicine. However, this was not always the case. Anaesthesiology is a new specialty with less than 200 years of history. Thomas Green Morton successfully performed the first public demonstration of general anaesthesia on 16 October, 1846, in the United States.^{1,2} This procedure allowed for painless removal of a cervical tumour in front of an expectant audience.

In Chile, the first general anaesthesia was performed in the port of Valparaíso two years later. By that time, Chile, a small country in South America, was a very different place from what it is today. Santiago, the capital, was a city of approximately 60,000 inhabitants. The railroad had not yet arrived, there were no telephones, and the first telegraph between Santiago and the port of Valparaíso was only established in 1851.³

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Francisco Javier Villanueva, MD, was in love with medicine. He was born in Argentina on 3 December, 1810. He studied medicine at the University of Buenos Aires. However, for political reasons he decided to migrate to Chile.⁴

Some history books that mention Dr Villanueva highlight his organizational and administrative skills, along with his clinical expertise, but they do not mention his anaesthetic records. On 8 October, Dr Villanueva was urgently called to care for an elderly woman who had suffered an accident. He rushed to San Juan de Dios Hospital in Valparaíso. The patient was 90 years old, and her life-threatening condition was very severe.^{5,6}

In this context, he must have considered that the patient’s risk of mortality due to the need for limb amputation was already very high and that, if the procedure could be made painless, it could increase her chances of survival after the surgery. The entire surgery probably took less than ten minutes. We do not know who administered the anaesthesia. What we do know is that Dr Villanueva performed the surgery.

The most important newspaper in Valparaíso *El Mercurio* published the following on 23 October: ‘Brilliant success with chloroform: the distinguished naval surgeon, Francisco Javier Villanueva, has just achieved a brilliant success with the use of chloroform in a surgical operation. A 90-year-old woman had been brought to the hospital with her arm shattered from a fall. In her condition it was thought she would only survive a few hours. Dr Villanueva decided to amputate her arm with the aid of chloroform, which was carried out without pain.’⁶

No more surgeries using inhalational anaesthetics were performed in Chile until 1868—20 years later—when the first abdominal surgery (oophorectomy) with chloroform was performed in the city of Concepción.



Figure 2 – San Juan de Dios Hospital in Valparaíso. 1863. Flickr.⁷

Francisco Javier Villanueva was the first to make painless surgery a reality in our country, the first person to demonstrate that, in this faraway country, things could be done as well as abroad.

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