Many great people had significantly increased our knowledge & improved the safety of obstetric anesthesia (OB anes). None seems more important and insightful than James Young Simpson. It is not just because he administered the first OB anes, but his tireless dedication to improve OB care and his visionary ability to foresee future needs that makes him the most important character in OB anes history.

Simpson, at age 14, enrolled at Edinbury University. Barely passed his teens, he was made a member at the Royal College of Surgeons. Shortly after Morton's historic ether demonstration in Boston, Simpson made a giant leap for OB anes by administering the first OB anes with diethyl ether to anesthetize a woman with a deformed pelvis for delivery on January 19, 1847. Later, in search of safer anesthetic, Simpson & colleagues inhaled various chemical vapors around dinner table. When he regained consciousness from sniffing chloroform, he knew pain was conquered. He then pioneered the use of chloroform for anesthesia which John Snow later refined. In 19th century, scientific evidences were often less important than rhetoric in medical practices. Many prominent physicians opposed to idea of OB anes with a fierce & dogged resistance. Simpson, an imposing man with charisma, compassion and dedication, was well prepared to persuade his opponents. However, it was not until Queen Victoria finally acknowledged receiving anesthetic for delivery of her last child that OB anes became generally accepted.

Simpson continued with his prodigious energy to establish anesthetic use throughout the civilized world while also providing quality health care to both rich and poor without thought for his own health. Besides his OB anes achievements, he improved OB care through design of OB forceps, fighting against puerperal sepsis, reform of hospital practice and even archeology, all of which led him to be the first knighted for service in medicine and even with “Victo Dolore” as inscription of his coat of arms. He died age 58 and was offered burial at Westminster Abbey by the Queen. Over 100 thousand citizens lined his funeral and over 1700 colleagues took part in procession.

Simpson’s influence is truly timeless. After administered his first OB anesthetic, he profoundly stated,” It will be necessary to ascertain anesthesia’s precise effect, both upon the action of the uterus and on the assistant abdominal muscles; its influence, if any, upon the child; whether it has a tendency to hemorrhage or other complications.” With his insightful and visionary statement, he identified essential issues and provided a roadmap to guide many prominent scientists to follow in a quest for better OB care for hundreds of years to come; even including today’s contemporary research topics such as anesthetic effects on labor progress, fetus and neonates. Simpson’s influence is truly timeless and is really what makes him such an important person in OB anesthesia and in medicine as a whole.