

Pask Award

Dr Richard Harris



Dr Richard (Harry) Harris was born in Adelaide, Australia, and completed his medical degree at Flinders University. He was awarded his Fellowship of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists in 1998. From childhood Harry was a passionate diver, and more latterly developed expertise in cave diving. His unique combination of anaesthesia training and reputation as a world class cave diver destined him to become a central player in what history will record as arguably the most extraordinary search and rescue mission ever undertaken.

On 23 June 2018 twelve boys and their soccer coach entered the Tham Luang cave in Thailand for a team building experience. Torrential rain caused the cave to flood and forced the boys to retreat over 2.5 kilometres underground where they became trapped by long convoluted passageways filled with fast flowing murky water that was not expected to recede for months. It was nine days before British divers Richard Stanton and John Volanthen found them and laid the line that facilitated access to their refuge through zero visibility water by other dive teams. Elation at finding the children was rapidly tempered by the realisation that the only viable option for their rescue was diving them out through a cave system that was proving challenging to some of the world's best cave divers, and which tragically claimed the life of a Thai Navy SEAL. It seemed impossible that untrained non-swimming children could make this arduous underwater journey without panicking and drowning.

Harry was asked to undertake multiple risky dives into the cave and to consider deeply sedating each child who would then be brought out by an escorting diver. Published guidelines expressly discourage attempts to keep unconscious divers underwater because of difficulty protecting the airway and the danger of drowning. But Harry judged that he had little choice but to set aside these guidelines and embark on a hazardous procedure never before undertaken. With no monitoring or immediate support, he calmly anaesthetised each child with oral alprazolam and intramuscular ketamine. He supervised the critical processes of fitting the full-face diving masks to protect the airway, and deployment of the children with the escorting divers.

Using this approach every child and the coach were safely brought out of the cave to unprecedented international acclaim.

The general public will never fully appreciate the enormous responsibility that Harry voluntarily assumed in this rescue, but anaesthetists are uniquely placed to understand it. When managing a desperately ill patient for whom hazardous intervention is the only option that may save life, we may rationalise bad outcomes by telling ourselves "we had no choice and did our best". But that same rationalisation would have been of little comfort to Harry when contemplating a repetitive, unconventional and dangerous anaesthetic intervention in healthy boys whose fate was being watched by the entire world, and whose desperate parents and families were waiting outside. The implications of even one adverse outcome are as obvious as they are unpalatable, and seen through that lens, Harry's actions were not only technically expert but also extraordinarily courageous.

Harry is known in both the diving and medical communities as an extremely modest, unassuming, quiet achiever. Although grateful, he would be very uncomfortable receiving this award without acknowledgement of his steadfast view that he was part of a large team, and that all its members contributed significantly to the outcome. Harry would also undoubtedly want to acknowledge his wife Fiona and their children James, Charlie and Millie who have spent many long and often anxious days waiting for him to return from cave diving expeditions.

Finally, it remains to observe the palpable similarities between Harry and the patron of this award. Dr Pask was another diver-anaesthetist who was prepared to push boundaries and take personal risks in pursuit of scientific truth and better outcomes for all. We believe he would be proud to see his eponymous award go to Dr Richard Harris.

Professor Simon Mitchell

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Association
of Anaesthetists