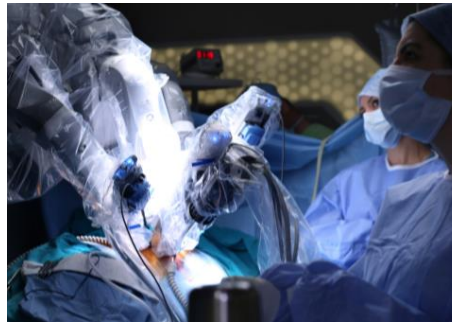
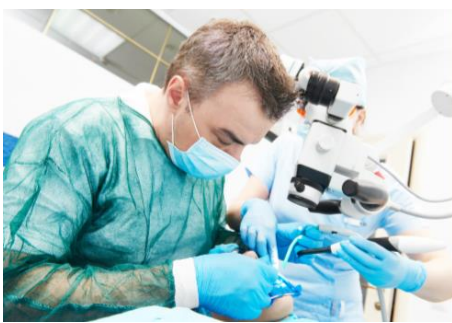


Images of surgery



Frances Burney's account of surgery

Frances Burney (1752–1840) was an English novelist, diarist and playwright. On 30th September 1811, she underwent surgery without anaesthetic, performed by seven doctors. This is a fictional account of her operation, based on her journal letter to Esther Burnley, written in 1812.



I climbed up onto the mattress and one of the doctors spread a handkerchief over my face. He was hoping I would not be able to see what was about to happen. The handkerchief, however, was transparent and I saw right through it.

I was encircled by seven men and my poor, tearful nurse. I refused to be held down, but when I saw the shiny, polished knife, I tightly shut my eyes. There was a long silence. I did not breathe!

When I felt the first incision, I screamed and did not stop until the operation was over. I am surprised the sound does not still ring in my ears. The pain was unbearable. When the cuts had been made, I thought the burning pain would stop but it did not! Even the air that rushed into my wound felt like a razor blade.

As the operation continued, the pain was so excruciating that I thought I had actually fainted! I closed my eyes tightly as the surgeons continued to work. I could tell from the scratches and the scrapings that my operation was no easy task. Whilst all of this was happening, I lay completely still! I found all the courage I could from deep inside me and I did not move, I did not stop them, I did not speak and I did not resist the pain that I felt.

For many months after this horrendous experience, I could not talk to anyone about it. I was sick whenever someone asked me a question about my surgery. Even now, nine months after, I have a headache from writing to you about it! I do not want to read it back because the memories are too painful to remember.

Robert Liston's surgery before anaesthetic

Robert Liston (1794–1847) was a Scottish surgeon. He was famous for the speed at which he performed his surgeries before anaesthetic was used. This is a fictional account of one of his operations.



'Time me, gentlemen!' a voice commands. It's 1842. University College, London is full with people, but they are not here to read books or even write essays. No, they are here to observe Sir Robert Liston, the best surgeon of his time.

The nervous medical students are holding pocket watches and are poised to start timing. Liston's assistant, the 'dresser', takes a sympathetic but strong hold of the patient's shoulders. The patient is petrified – wriggling and struggling to get away. He has a very badly broken leg and is already in an incredible amount of pain. His facial expression reveals a look of sheer horror as he catches sight of the knives, saws and needles that lie alongside him.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Liston grabs the patient's thigh, picks up his favourite knife and in one swift movement, makes a cut in the man's broken leg. The piercing scream of the poor man fills the galleries, echoing all around. Some students scrunch up their noses, some open their eyes in amazement, some show no emotion. Liston puts the knife away... and grabs the saw.

The nervous student who is holding the broken leg to keep it still, notices the leg suddenly feels very heavy – it has been completely cut off from the body! The operation is over and it has taken just 30 seconds. Totally shocked, he drops the detached leg into a box of sawdust that is waiting underneath.