

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.