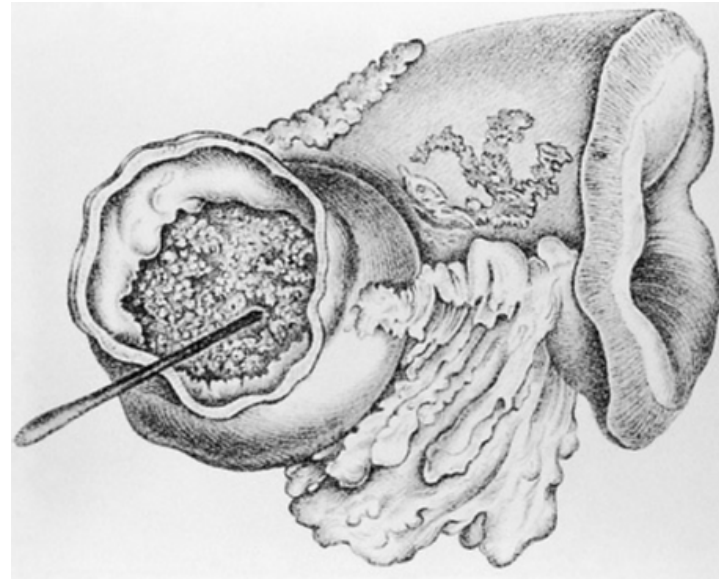


This Week in History

Theodor Billroth

FOUNDER OF MODERN ABDOMINAL SURGERY



1. Theodor Billroth

On this week (April 26, 1829 to February 6, 1894), birth of Theodor Billroth, Founder of Modern Abdominal Surgery

2. Who was Theodor Billroth?

Full name Christian Albert Theodor Billroth
Late 19th century Viennese surgeon, medical scientist and musician
Widely considered the founder of modern abdominal surgery

April 26, 1829 - Born at Bergen auf Rügen in Prussia
1848-52 - Studied medicine at the universities of Greifswald, Göttingen, and Berlin
1853-60 - Trained under Bernard von Langenbeck, one of the founders of modern German surgery
1860-67 - Appointed professor of surgery and director of the surgical clinic at the University of Zurich, where he pioneered the surgical audit and began publishing his famed surgical texts
1867 - Appointed Professor of Surgery at the University of Vienna, where he founded one of the great schools of surgery and became responsible for many major surgical landmarks

6. Legacy

After his passing, Theodor Billroth left behind a monumental legacy in surgery, medical sciences, medical education, and the arts.

His many qualities such as belief in the importance of scientific knowledge, transparency, peer audit, and interests beyond medicine form a model for a surgeon to emulate that to this day remains relevant and inspirational.

3. A Pioneer in Surgery

1867 - First perineal prostatectomy for cancer
1872 - First oesophagectomy
1873 - First total laryngectomy for cancer carcinoma
1875 - First successful suprapubic removal of bladder cancer
1881 - First successful partial gastrectomy with gastroduodenostomy (now known as Billroth's operation I), performed on Thérèse Heller for gastric cancer
1885 - First partial gastrectomy with gastrojejunostomy (now known as Billroth's operation II)
1891 - First hemipelvectomy (unsuccessful)



4. Scientific Rigour and Restraint

Billroth believed that surgery required a mastery of histology, pathology, and clinical diagnosis. He used his knowledge of the basic sciences to develop his surgical methods, and boasted that he spent as many hours at a microscope as at an operating table. His pioneering techniques were often developed and trialled for years on animals and cadavers before he attempted them in humans. He also took care to identify the appropriate contexts and timings for surgery based on histological and pathological knowledge.

5. Transparency in Medicine

Billroth pioneered the concept of the audit to scrutinise surgical practice, and believed recording failures to be as important as conveying successes. He published unabridged results for all his operations, both positive and negative, and founded the modern concept of including mortality, complications, and follow-up in reporting. This transparency allowed others to benefit from his experiences and drove improvement in the field. Honest and meticulous documentation and learning from mistakes remain core values in medicine to this day.

"He who cannot quote his therapeutic experiences in numbers is a charlatan; be truthful for clarity's sake, do not hesitate to admit failures as they must show the mode and places of improvement." - Theodor Billroth's inaugural lecture as head of the Second Surgical Department in Vienna, 1867

6. Life Beyond The Operating Theatre

Billroth had a lifelong passion for music, and mastered the piano, the viola, and the violin. After completing his secondary education, he had considered becoming a musician but was persuaded by his mother to study medicine for financial reasons. Outside of his surgical activities, he directed the orchestra, wrote musical criticism for newspapers, and hosted musical groups in his home studio. He was close friends with composer Johannes Brahms and music critic Eduard Hanslick, and Brahms dedicated his string quartets Op. 51 N°1 and N°2 to Billroth. Billroth considered his interest in music to be inseparable from his ability as a surgeon.

"It is one the superficialities of our time to see in science and in art, two opposites. Imagination is the mother of both." - Theodor Billroth

