Teaching and acquiring surgical skills in the 16th century. An analysis of medical students' notebooks and letters.

Michael Stolberg

Surgery is widely believed to have played only a marginal role in academic teaching and medical practice in the Renaissance. True, there was a tiny elite of learned or indeed academically trained physician-surgeons such as Ambroise Paré in France and Wilhelm Fabry in Germany but, in general, learned physicians – and certainly those North of the Alps – are said to have left surgery to barber-surgeons and itinerant *opérateurs*. To the degree, learned physicians devoted themselves to surgery at all, it was a largely a bookish undertaking, with little practical application.

As I will argue in my paper, this well-established narrative gives only part of the story. Drawing on students‘ lecture notes, personal note books and letters which more immediately reflect university teaching, in this case especially in Padua between 1550 and 1600, I want to show that practical surgery held a much more prominent place in future physicians’ medical training than historians have believed. Even anatomical demonstrations could serve that purpose and, according to these notes and letters, medical students accorded considerable importance to the acquisition surgical knowledge and skills, from the suturing of abdominal or indeed intestinal wounds and the surgical treatment of hernias to the surgical drainage of empyemas and performing a paracentesis in abdominal dropsy. This interest in surgical practice was in line with contemporary medical students‘ more general interest in the acquisition of concrete practical knowledge and skills which would allow them to mark their superior status in the medical market-place and help them acquire a successful practice.