Johannes Friedrich August von Esmarch Biography

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Biography

Known for his innovations in the area of military surgery, Esmarch introduced the use of first aid bandages on the battlefield and a method of amputation that minimized loss of blood.

Esmarch was born in Tönning, Germany and received his education at the University of Göttingen. He earned his medical degree in 1848 at the University of Kiel, after which he worked briefly as an assistant to a famous professor there. Later in 1848, Esmarch began serving in the German Army as a military surgeon during his country's campaign against Denmark. He remained in that post until 1850, when the Danes captured him and held him as a prisoner of war. After his release, Esmarch remained associated with the University of Kiel and was appointed a professor of surgery there in 1857.

Germany went to war with Denmark again in 1864, with Austria in 1866, and with France in 1870. Esmarch accompanied the troops as military surgeon on each of these campaigns, having achieved the rank of surgeon general by 1870. During these battles, he invented the tools and techniques for which he would long be remembered in the medical world, including a rubber tourniquet in 1869 that could expel virtually all the blood from a limb before it was amputated, thus saving blood that would otherwise have been lost, and a military first aid kit in 1869 that allowed injured troops to receive quicker and better medical attention for their wounds. In addition, he introduced the concept of antiseptic treatment to his country in about 1869, immeasurably improving surgical outcomes and quality of care throughout Germany.

Esmarch wrote an authoritative text called *The Handbook of Military Surgical Technique* and several textbooks on first aid that were widely distributed and considered the best references on the subjects. He also initiated first aid training for civilians and the military. Germany's leaders thought so highly of Esmarch's contributions that the emperor himself made the surgeon a nobleman in 1887. Esmarch died in Kiel in 1908.