Richard von Volkmann Biography

Richard von Volkmann

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Biography

Von Volkmann pioneered antiseptic procedures and was especially known for his advances in orthopedic surgery.

Von Volkmann was born in Leipzig, Germany and attended medical schools in Giessen, Halle, and Berlin. Starting in 1867, he worked as a professor of surgery at the University of Halle, also directing its medical clinic.

Near the beginning of his illustrious medical career, von Volkmann and a partner discovered a method for operating effectively on joints and the extremities. From 1865 to 1872, he contributed sections to the *Pitha-Billroth Handbook of Surgery*, while from 1870 to 1889 he served as editor of *The Collection of Clinical Lectures*. Von Volkmann also wrote *Contributions on Surgery* in 1873. An avid writer of nonclinical prose as well, the surgeon (using the pen name Richard Leander) enjoyed crafting fairy tales and poems that were sometimes accompanied by his artist son's professional illustrations.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Von Volkmann firmly believed in the benefits of maintaining a sterile environment during surgery and other clinical procedures when infection was possible. His status as a surgeon encouraged the acceptance of antiseptic practices. In 1878 Von Volkmann became the first surgeon to excise a cancerous rectum, while several years earlier, he discovered that long exposure to tar and paraffin can precipitate skin cancer. In 1881, he provided the first clinical description of a contraction of the fingers, now known as Volkmann's contracture, caused by pressure or injury. The surgeon died in Jena, Germany, in 1889.