

Hand surgery in Germany

The history of hand surgery in Germany includes a lot of well-known surgeons, orthopaedists, and anatomists and their publications, including: Josias Weitbrecht (1702-1747) on syndesmologia; Gustav Biedermann Günther (1801-1866) on anatomy of the wrist; Friedrich von Esmarch (1823-1908) on tourniquet; Richard von Volkmann (1830-1889) on ischaemic contracture; Max Oberst (1849-1925) on finger anaesthesia; August Bier (1861-1949) on Bier block; Otto W. Madelung (1846-1926) on Madelung deformity; Konrad Biesalski (1868-1930) on tendon transposition; Paul Sudeck (1866-1945) on chronic regional pain syndrome; Hermann Krukenberg (1863-1935) on Krukenberg arm; Ferdinand Sauerbruch (1875-1951) on active mobile hand prosthesis; Martin Kirschner (1879-1942) on Kirschner wire; Erich Lexer (1867-1937) on free tendon grafts; and Otto Hilgenfeld (1900-1983) on thumb reconstruction and pollicisation.

However, in their time, surgeons worked only part time in treating the patients with hand problems. In 1959, Dieter Buck-Gramcko (1927–2012) introduced a journal club (Handchirurgischer Literaturzirkel) to exchange copies of articles about hand surgery.

Out of this international club, Deutschsprachige Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Handchirurgie (DAH) (i.e. German Speaking Association for Hand Surgery) was officially founded on 7 October 1965 during a symposium in Vienna. Its members were from different European countries, mainly Austria, Switzerland, and Italy.

In 1990, Germany developed its own national society in order to join the newly founded Federation of the European of Societies for Surgery of the Hand (FESSH). This gave birth to the present-day German Society for Hand Surgery (DGH). The first presidents were Dieter Buck-Gramcko (1991) and Ulrich Lanz (1993). The size of the DGH has grown continuously, presently with 1373 members.

Parallel to the DGH, the German Association for Hand Therapy (DAHTH) was founded in 1995 and currently has 747 members. It has developed its own curriculum and training courses for physiotherapists and occupational therapists to become a hand therapist.

The German Society for Hand Surgery organizes an annual congress with approximately 600-700 participants in different cities with different presidents for each meeting. Since 2006 the annual congress has been combined with the annual meeting of the DAHTH with at least two combined scientific sessions in each meeting.

Twice a year the society organizes a two-day education seminar for hand surgery in Berlin and Bonn.

The executive committee of the DGH consists of the president, the president-elect, and the past president. Each of them has a term of 1 year. The secretary general, treasurer, and four-member advisory board have 3-year terms.

The council board consists of an additional 47 hand surgeons organizing and representing the 22 committees and delegations of the society. The board and the executive committee members meet twice yearly, once in February and during the annual congress in the autumn.

The general member meeting takes place during the annual congress. Two months prior to the meeting, committee activities and relevant information are communicated in an annual newsletter to the members.

In 1993 hand surgery was acknowledged a subspecialty in Germany. Since then, to be a hand surgeon requires 3 years of hand surgery training in a recognized centre with an oral examination at the medical council. The training and sub-specialization is open for general, orthopaedic, traumatology, and plastic surgeons. Hand surgery in Germany covers the hand, wrist, and forearm. It includes the treatment of all structures and tissues in that region and all surgical techniques including microsurgery, osteosynthesis, and arthroscopy. Hand surgical procedures are covered by the national health insurance and are provided as an outpatient as well as an inpatient service, depending on the nature and extent of surgery.

There are only a few completely independent hand surgical clinics in the country, the first being established in Hamburg in 1963. Most hand surgeons are in an orthopaedic-traumatological or plastic surgical unit. In Hamburg, there is one subspecialized unit treating only children, founded by Dieter Buck-Gramcko.

The value of hand surgical expertise is appreciated by the workers' compensation insurance companies. Several work-injury related reconstructive procedures, as well as complex hand trauma and amputations, have to be treated in hand centres accredited by the workers compensation insurance companies. Criteria for certification include at least three fully trained hand surgeons, an independent head of the department, a 24-h replantation service every day, and hand therapists to ensure coordinated rehabilitation. These criteria are similar to the FESSH criteria to become an accredited European Hand Trauma Centre. Germany now has 27 Hand Trauma and Replantation Centres (HTRCs) and 12 Hand Trauma Units (HTUs).

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