

Teaching and research

The origins of surgical teaching and research stretch back into the early 18th century, being based centrally in what is now the Old College area.

[Edinburgh Medical School](#)

The Medical School was established at the University of Edinburgh in 1726. The Surgeon, John Munro had considerable influence in ensuring that, in 1720, his son Alexander Munro Primus was appointed to the Chair of Anatomy although this had been established extramurally by the town council in 1705.

[Alexander Munro's biography](#)

The teaching of surgery took place as a part of the anatomy course established by Munro Primus and was continued by the succeeding Munros, Secundus and Tertius for over 100 years. Although these anatomist leaders made significant contributions, university anatomy was increasingly seen as being inappropriate for the training of practical surgery. The late 18th century saw a growth of extramural teaching in the subject and much of this was delivered from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. The College established its own professorship in 1804 and provided teaching in surgery right up until the University of Edinburgh established a surgical chair (in systematic surgery) in 1831.

[Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh](#)

Whilst a considerable amount of teaching took place within the Royal College of Surgeons and the University of Edinburgh, the opportunities for undergraduate teaching and postgraduate training escalated with the establishment of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, which opened in 1741 at its original site in Infirmary Street. The hospital was vacated in 1789 (and demolished five years later) with the opening of the hospital at Lauriston Place. This site remained the main focus of surgical teaching until its closure in May 2003, with the transfer of all services to its site at Little France.

[The Lister Department of Surgery](#)

The origins of surgical research at the University of Edinburgh followed on from the establishment of a Chair of Systematic Surgery in 1831. John Chiene was appointed as successor to Professor James Spence to the Chair of Systematic Surgery in 1882. Chiene was born in Edinburgh and educated at Edinburgh Academy and the University of Edinburgh, although he did spend several short periods of study in Paris, Berlin and Vienna before graduating MD with Honours in 1865. He benefited from having served as House Surgeon to Professor James Syme, was Demonstrator of Anatomy under Professor John Goodsir and Professor Sir William Turner before he was appointed Lecturer in Surgery at the Medical School. He was appointed as Surgeon at the Royal Infirmary and enjoyed a close professional relationship with Joseph Lister, who had moved from Glasgow in 1869 to the Regius Chair of Clinical Surgery. Chiene developed a reputation as a teacher and clinical researcher of some note. He was responsible for establishing the first academic surgical research laboratory in the British Isles and promoted both bacteriological and pathological research with his staff and apprentices. Chiene was an enthusiastic golfer and sportsman and was elected the first President of the Scottish Rugby Union when it was formed in 1873. He was held in the highest esteem and affection by students and colleagues and, on his retirement, monies were raised to paint his portrait which now hangs on the walls of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. An excess of funds was raised and the balance was used to strike bronze commemorative medals for his staff and a silver medal that was presented to him on his retirement. It is a replica of the bronze medals that is presented to the successful candidate who has presented the best surgical paper at the annual School of Surgery meeting in the University of Edinburgh.

Sir David Wilkie succeeded Professor Alexis Thompson to the Chair of Systematic Surgery in 1924. Wilkie was born in Kirriemuir and educated at Edinburgh Academy before graduating from the University of Edinburgh in 1904. That he was to rise to academic prominence was evident from his also being awarded the degrees of MD and ChM within five years of graduating from University. He worked under Sir Harold Stiles and Professor Francis Caird and spent time visiting the surgical centres of Bonn, Bern and Vienna. On returning as Private Assistant to Francis Caird he became an advocate for experimental surgery. His research interests extended from his work on antisepsis following his appointment as Visiting Professor to the Peter Brent Brigham Hospital in Boston. He attracted a number of bright assistants one of whom, Charles Illingworth, went on to develop his own professorial dynasty. Wilkie established a major research department next to the Reid School of Music and the Anatomy Department. The facility included an operating theatre, an X-ray department and photography department and it was considered to be one of the best outside any American institution. Wilkie made a substantial anonymous contribution to the University which allowed the extension of his own surgical research department. Wilkie died at the relatively young age of 56 from gastric cancer. His legacy to academic surgery was immense and the Wilkie Laboratories, along with those originally established by Chiene, were brought together as the Lister Department of Surgery in the Royal Infirmary. These were temporarily located in the old Pathology Department on the old Medical School site at Lauriston Place before moving the Chancellor's Building on the Little France site in 2005.