

# Mastectomy without Anesthesia: The Cases of Abigail Adams Smith and Fanny Burney

Helle Mathiasen, CandMag, PhD

Program in Medical Humanities, University of Arizona College of Medicine, Tucson.

Elizabeth Edwards (1949-2010) survived breast cancer for 6 years. She had the benefits of modern medical science, including anesthesia and painkillers. Despite her disease, Edwards published 2 bestsellers and shared upbeat messages on Facebook about her fate. Two hundred years ago, before the discovery of anesthesia by ether and painkilling pharmaceuticals, the odds of dying from illness and infection were much worse; nevertheless, some breast cancer patients dared to submit to surgery. The stories of 2 such women—Abigail Adams Smith (1765-1813), first-born child of John and Abigail Adams, and British novelist Fanny (Frances) Burney (1752-1840)—have been well-documented, and offer inspiration to breast cancer victims as well as insight into the history of surgery.<sup>1</sup>

When Abigail Adams Smith, or “Nabby,” at age 46, noticed a lump in her breast, she decided to leave her family’s farm in upstate New York and move back to her parents’ home in Quincy, Massachusetts. She consulted with doctors Tufts and Rush, informing them her tumor was moving. Rush responded by mail to her father with this advice: “Her time of life calls for expedition in this business, for tumors such as hers tend much more rapidly to cancer after 45 than in more early life.” She must have a mastectomy.

Several Boston surgeons journeyed to Quincy, among them John Collins Warren, of Ether Dome fame. In November 1811, they performed a mastectomy on their patient in a bedroom of her parents’ home. The operation lasted 25 minutes. They dressed her wound for an hour. Although suffering agonies, the patient displayed exceptional fortitude. But just 2 years later, an emaciated Abigail Adams Smith returned to Quincy to die, assisted only by opium. Abigail Adams wrote of her daughter’s courage: “She told her physician that she was perfectly sensible of her situation and reconciled to it . . . Although she was bolstered up in her

bed and could neither walk or stand, she was always calm.” McCollough writes that her father said “he had felt during Nabby’s agony . . . as if he were living in the Book of Job.”<sup>2</sup>

Fanny Burney, married to an Adjutant General in the army of Louis XVI and living in Paris, was operated on by 7 French surgeons in Paris, on September 30, 1811. Dominique-Jean Larrey (1766-1842), First Surgeon to the Imperial Guard of Napoleon, directed the operation. Nine months after her mastectomy, Fanny Burney penned an extraordinary description in a letter to her sister. At home, Burney had breakfasted and written some letters when 4 carriages stopped at her door. A physician gave her a wine cordial, then “7 Men in black” entered her room. One doctor demands 2 old mattresses and an old sheet. She mounts the bed; they spread a cambric handkerchief over her eyes, but she sees “the glitter of polished Steel—I closed my Eyes.” Dr. Larrey says: “Qui me tiendra ce sein?” Burney hands the surgeon her breast. But when they start to cut, she begins to scream: “I then felt the Knife [racking] against the breast bone-scraping it!” In retrospect, she feels proud: “However, I bore it with all the courage I could exert, & never moved, nor stopt them, nor resisted, nor remonstrated, nor spoke – except once or twice, during the dressings . . .” Carried from her room, she opens her eyes: “& I then saw my good Dr. Larrey, pale nearly as myself, his face streaked with blood, & its expression depicting grief, apprehension, & almost horror.” Her surgery had lasted 3 hours and 45 minutes. One of her doctors praised her “grand Courage.”<sup>3</sup>

One of 2 factors may explain Burney’s surviving another 29 years: either the mastectomy was successful, or her tumor was not malignant. We cannot know for sure.

Middle-aged women like Edwards, Smith, and Burney fall into a statistical group of older women who show increased risk of breast cancer. Someday, all such breast cancer sufferers may live to tell their stories.

## References

1. Mathiasen H. Japanese anesthetics and experiments in The Doctor’s Wife. *Am J Med.* 2009;122(12):1163.
2. McCullough D. *John Adams.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster; 2001:602,613.
3. Hemlow J, ed. *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D’Arbly).* Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press; 1975:596-616.

**Funding:** None.

**Conflict of Interest:** None.

**Authorship:** The author is solely responsible for writing this manuscript. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Helle Mathiasen, Cand mag, PhD, Program in Medical Humanities, University of Arizona College of Medicine, 1840 East River Road, Suite 120, Tucson, AZ 85718-5960. E-mail address: hellem25@yahoo.com