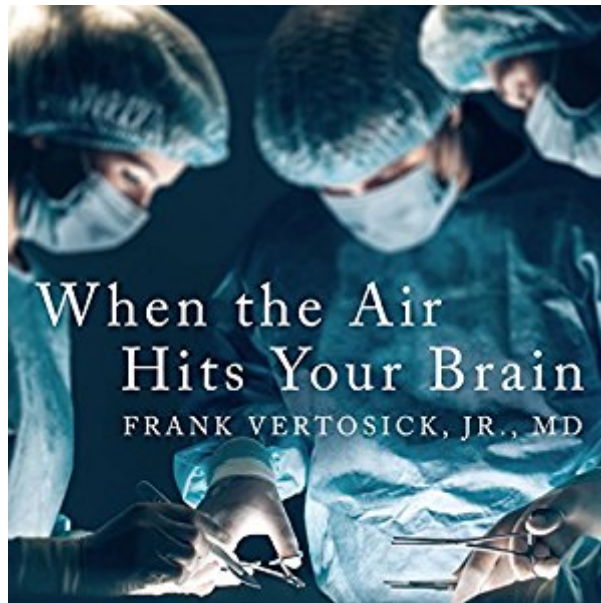


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# When The Air Hits Your Brain: Tales From Neurosurgery



## Synopsis

With poignant insight and humor, Frank Vertosick, Jr., MD, describes some of the greatest challenges of his career, including a six-week-old infant with a tumor in her brain, a young man struck down in his prime by paraplegia, and a minister with a .22-caliber bullet lodged in his skull. Told through intimate portraits of Vertosick's patients and unsparing-yet-fascinatingly detailed descriptions of surgical procedures, *When the Air Hits Your Brain* - the culmination of decades spent struggling to learn an unforgiving craft - illuminates both the mysteries of the mind and the realities of the operating room.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The history of neurosurgery is a fascinating one, however, even more interesting is to see how it has developed over the last century since, for example, the legendary Dr. Harvey Cushing forged the techniques of brain surgery over seventy years ago. `When the Air Hits Your Brain - Tales of Neurosurgery' is a compelling collection of tales written with erudition and sensitivity with at times gruesome detail of brain operations that sometimes were successful and other times not. As Dr. Vertosick proposes in his introduction, that, for the most part, a surgeon learns more from the failures than the successes; therefore most of the stories within are tragedies - failures that paved the way to future successes. For those interested in the world of neurosurgery, this book should more than satisfy as it covers a vast array of different cases as well as the general ambience and culture of this very specialized profession. The author begins his tale as a burgeoning medical student, internship, ending with his last year as Chief Resident. Interestingly, his last year, from his

perspective was his worst. He explains that being a Chief Resident is a precarious position, because you have to continue to cow tow to the attending staff and the junior residents continue to look upon you as just another taskmaster, a kind of in-house bully, ensuring the skills required are learned. Vertosick explains the position as "straddling two worlds, "...a sergeant in the surgical military, friend to neither enlisted man nor officer, endowed with great responsibilities but given little true authority." (P.254) There are many miraculous and downright bizarre cases chronicled throughout the text. One of the strange cases was the woman who had been shot between the eyes by her drunken and irate boyfriend. Dr.

Originally published in 1996, "When the Air Hits Your Brain," by Dr. Frank Vertosick, is a mesmerizing insider's look at "an arrogant occupation" whose practitioners operate on the spinal cord and the human brain ("a trillion nerve cells storing electrical patterns more numerous than the water molecules of the world's oceans"). A neurosurgeon must be supremely confident in his ability to get the job done; if he were to dwell on everything that could possibly go wrong during a procedure, he would be too terrified to operate. Because of the high potential for missteps, neurosurgical training is an arduous seven years of hell. Before he starts treating "brain cancers, spinal cord injuries, head trauma, [and] lethal hemorrhages," a trainee must endure a grueling regimen of study which includes repeated humiliation at the hands of verbally abusive mentors. This is not a profession for the faint-hearted, for when neurosurgery is unsuccessful, the results can be catastrophic. Even if the patient survives, his cognition, speech, movement, and vision may be forever compromised. In the words of Gary Stancik, a sardonic chief resident, the brain is like a '66 Cadillac: "It was built for performance, not for easy servicing." Vertosick fell into neurosurgery by happenstance. He spent some time as a steelworker, majored in theoretical physics, and wound up choosing medicine by default. In the years to come, he would have to adjust to impossibly long hours, inadequate sleep, and hit-or-miss meals. He would become adept at performing quickly and efficiently under pressure. However, none of his earlier experiences would fully prepare him for the emotional roller-coaster that lay ahead.

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