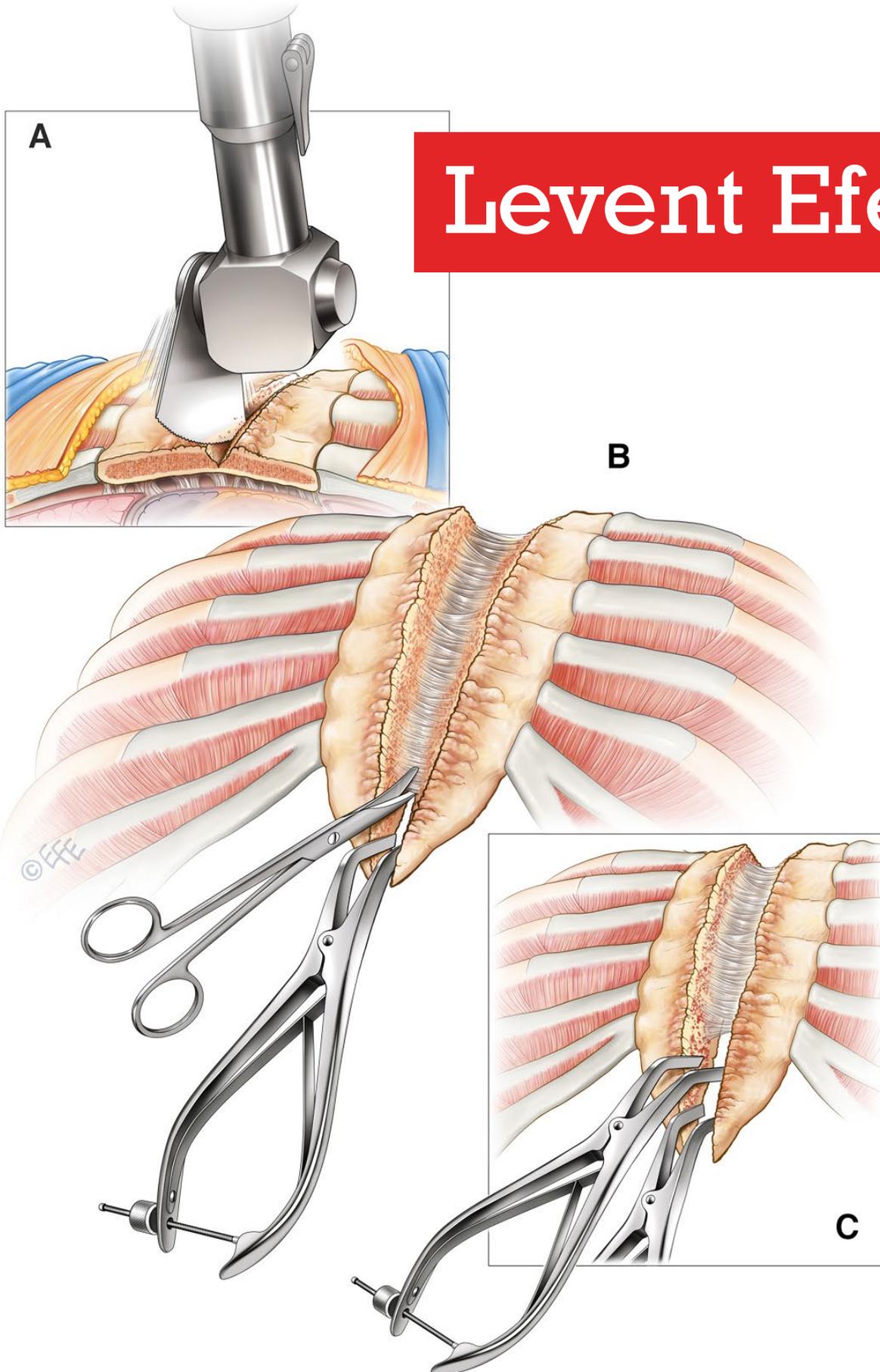


# Levent Efe



## {PROFILE}

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This former doctor discovered that his “fascination with human body and action [could] be channelled towards visual narration” early in his career, and he has successfully worked as a medical illustrator ever since. We are honoured to learn more about Levent’s work and career, as he explains more to Outline.

**Outline:** You first studied to be a doctor; then a medical illustrator. Can you tell us what inspired this, and how your previous studies influence your current work?

**Levent:** The wish to be creative overtook me, I guess. Human anatomy and teaching always inspired me a lot more than practicing medicine and interacting with patients. Once I realized that my fascination with human body and action can be channelled towards visual narration of medicine, I did not look back again.

My medical background helped me focus on the main message that needs to be conveyed. On the down side, not getting involved with art during my formative years may have held me back in developing my own expressive visual language.

**Outline:** How long have you worked in Australia as an illustrator? Have you found the market changing over this time?

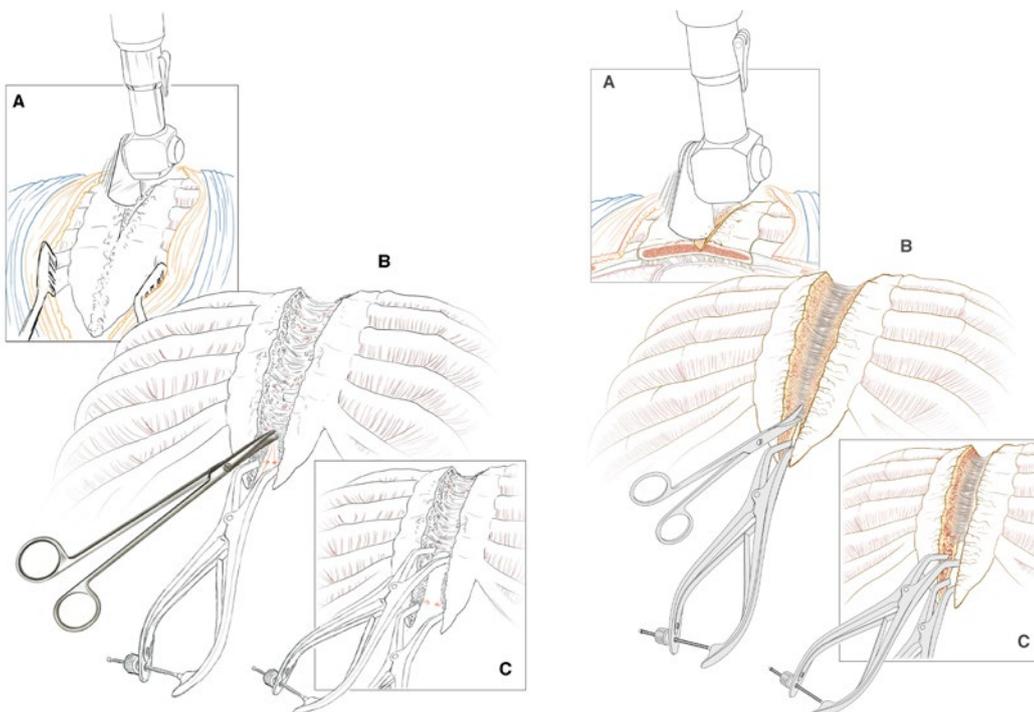
**Levent:** Just clocked my 25th year in Australia. When I first arrived, it was the ‘Hawke and Cain governments’, tram strikes and the long-lunching, ‘bygone days of Melbourne’. I soon after bumped into a group of local talent on the verge of establishing an “illustrators group”. Several pub meetings later (in the South Melbourne area, of course), our initial incarnation, the IAA was created,

with myself as proud member #35. Not much was happening north of the Yarra, we thought at the time..

IA still plays an important role as a representative body and inspiration for newcomers to the profession.

Similar to the general illustration market, medical visualization has gone through enormous advances through the past couple of decades. Not only that digital technology changed the face of everything, the information that needs to be relayed is getting increasingly more sophisticated. When you are working in a medical environment where the bulk of knowledge is said to be doubling every five years, ignoring all advances in medicine and surgery is not an option for us either. Patients are faced with choosing between 4-5 different highly complex operative techniques, and proper visual information is of paramount importance. So is immediacy of impact, as the attention span of all users of creative work is getting shorter and shorter.

The world market is constantly evolving. What you illustrate today may look outdated within a couple of years as the medical equipment you depict may no longer be available. Space is an increasingly valuable commodity in both digital and print versions of peer-reviewed medical journals, and authors expect from us unambiguous visual concepts with a clear focus. Researchers are allocated only six minutes to present their cases in some major



*Early drafts for the cover image for this article - Sternotomy.*

international meetings, and immediate impact with visuals is a make or break issue for them.

Medical publishing industry is going through the pains of switching to digital platforms, and what we offer to them has to indeed carry great weight and value.

Mergers and disappearance of small players in the world medical publishing industry resulted in all content creators regularly being squeezed to a corner. This is currently a major concern. Big publishing houses get authors to sign off all rights, including the visuals, which medical artists have not granted to anyone! I have so many works out there which I legally keep the copyright for, but some major international publishers pretend and act as if they have purchased those rights.

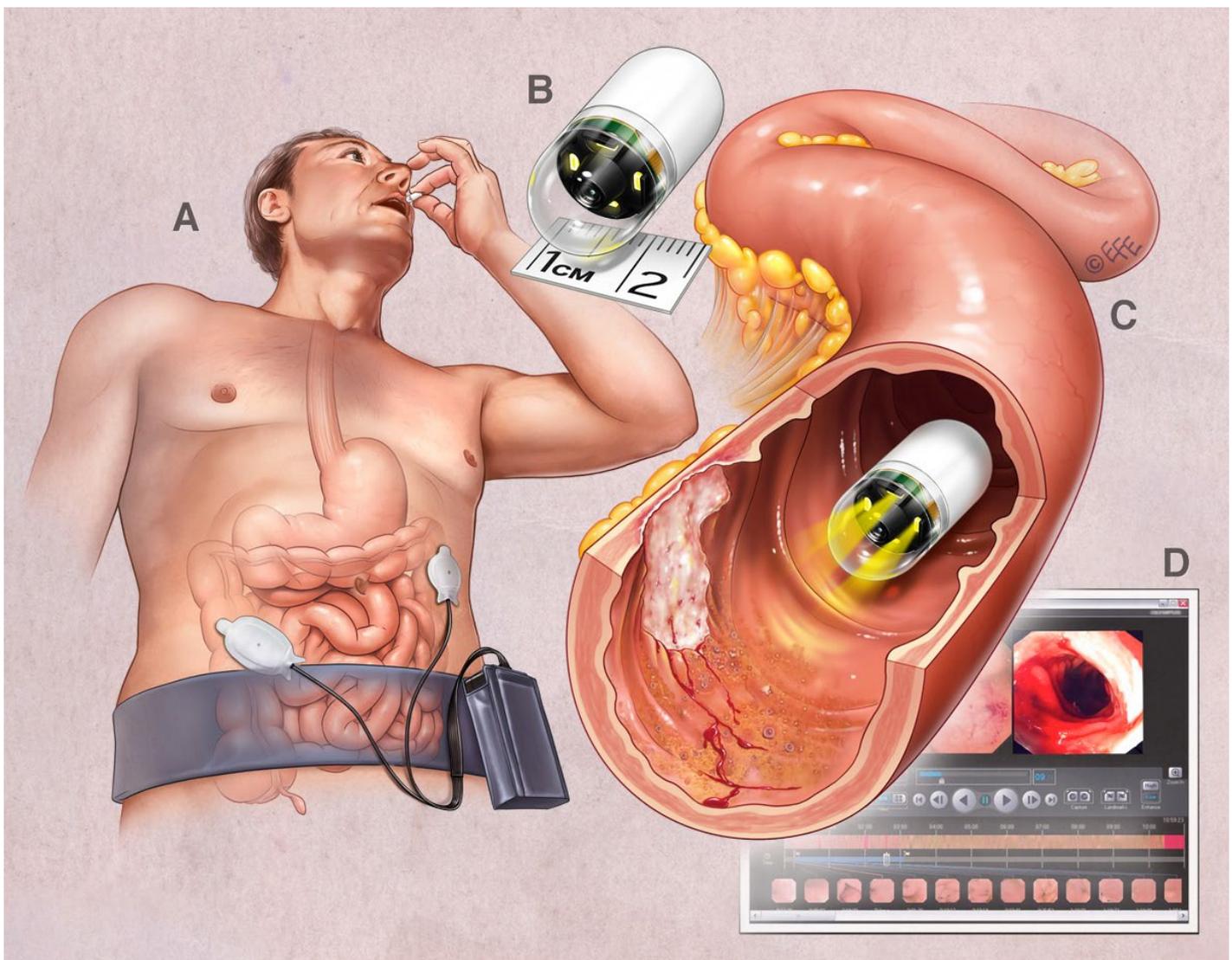
This David vs. Goliath confrontation is making lone freelancers more and more vulnerable, but young artists should never shy away from being vigilant about their rights. Giving away your own copyright will only help shorten your career.

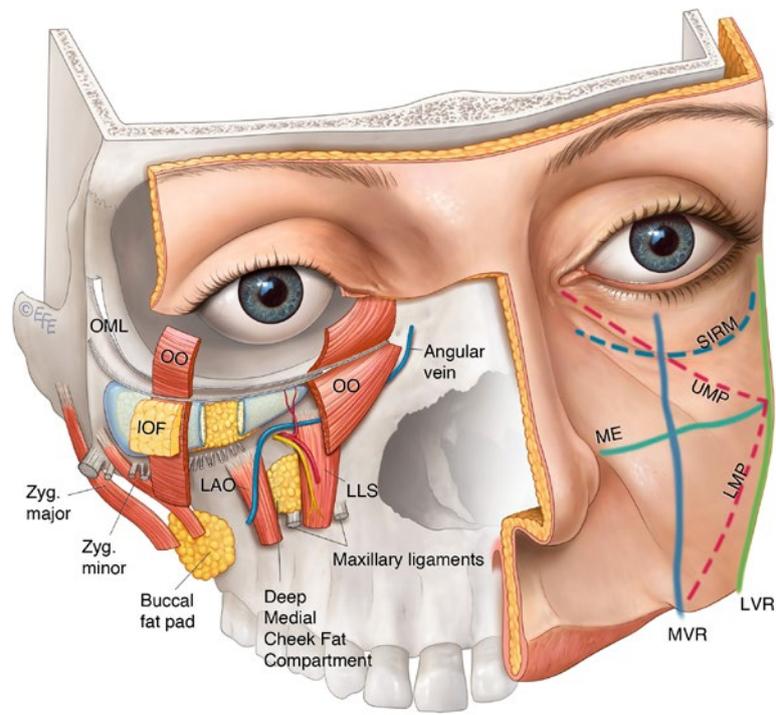
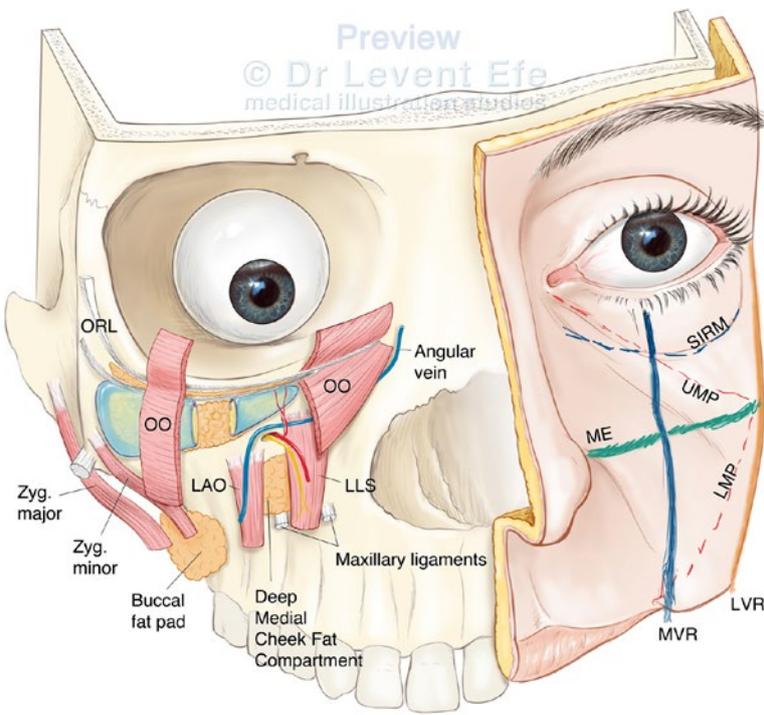
**Outline:** As a medical illustrator I am sure there is a great deal of research creating your detailed illustrations. Could you talk us through a project - the research, early sketches, and the process of creating the detailed work that you do?

**Levent:** Yes, a substantial amount of research is required, as the work we do is almost always about the most recent innovation or concept. No matter how short the briefing is, doctors almost always provide you with enough subtle clues to lead your research, as long as you are able to absorb that message.

My initial presentation to a client is either a halfway through image, or a fully completed one. The impact of the “final look” usually brings further possibilities, and clients are able to compact more information into the visual.

The image may go back and forth a few times before the final touch. A catheter may have been in the wrong angle, or the second author of the article may have an opposing





view on a detail. Giving the clients an assurance that all will be done until they are totally happy is a must, and their eventual satisfaction is the biggest reward we can get.

I recently received a message from an overseas client, who expressed his appreciation that his article was brought to the cover of the *Acta Neurochirurgica* journal just because of my illustration that accompanied it.

**Outline:** Who are your main clients? How do they typically find you?

**Levent:** I am mainly doing work for surgical specialists, health communicators and medical publishers. Many other medical illustrators have a more exciting range of clientele, like the film industry, lawyers, software developers, etc.

Visibility is always a critical issue for a lone freelancer, and promotional legwork always pays off. It is just a matter of being disciplined to spare the time, and doing the right kind of advertising. Several Social media outlets are now available for us all, and they require the same dedication and discipline.

Word of mouth, is of course the most assuring and least expensive way of advertising.

**Outline:** Is the world of medical illustration quite competitive? What are the different markets like for your work in Australia vs abroad?

**Levent:** The world market is indeed highly competitive, with the bulk of colleagues residing in North America where most of the research and sponsorship dollars are. Good professional ethics established by our forebears are still adhered to by the current membership of our professional body, the Association of Medical Illustrators (AMI). Intense competition and exemplary camaraderie go hand in hand among the members.

We are lucky here in Australia that the level of medical research and practice is second to none. So many local and visiting specialists have an important message to communicate visually.

Given the availability of innovative visual techniques today, our clientele are offered a variety of digital media options. Nevertheless, visually appealing presentation techniques should not be offered to the detriment of 'content'. It is my personal belief that some technically skilled animators today are struggling to elucidate the required message, because their colourful, glitzy animated sequence is not based on a proper storyboard. Content can easily get overlooked behind an incredibly appealing facade.

I am hoping schools of medical illustration are picking students that have basic figurative talent and high communication skills, rather than those who have mastered all the latest software.

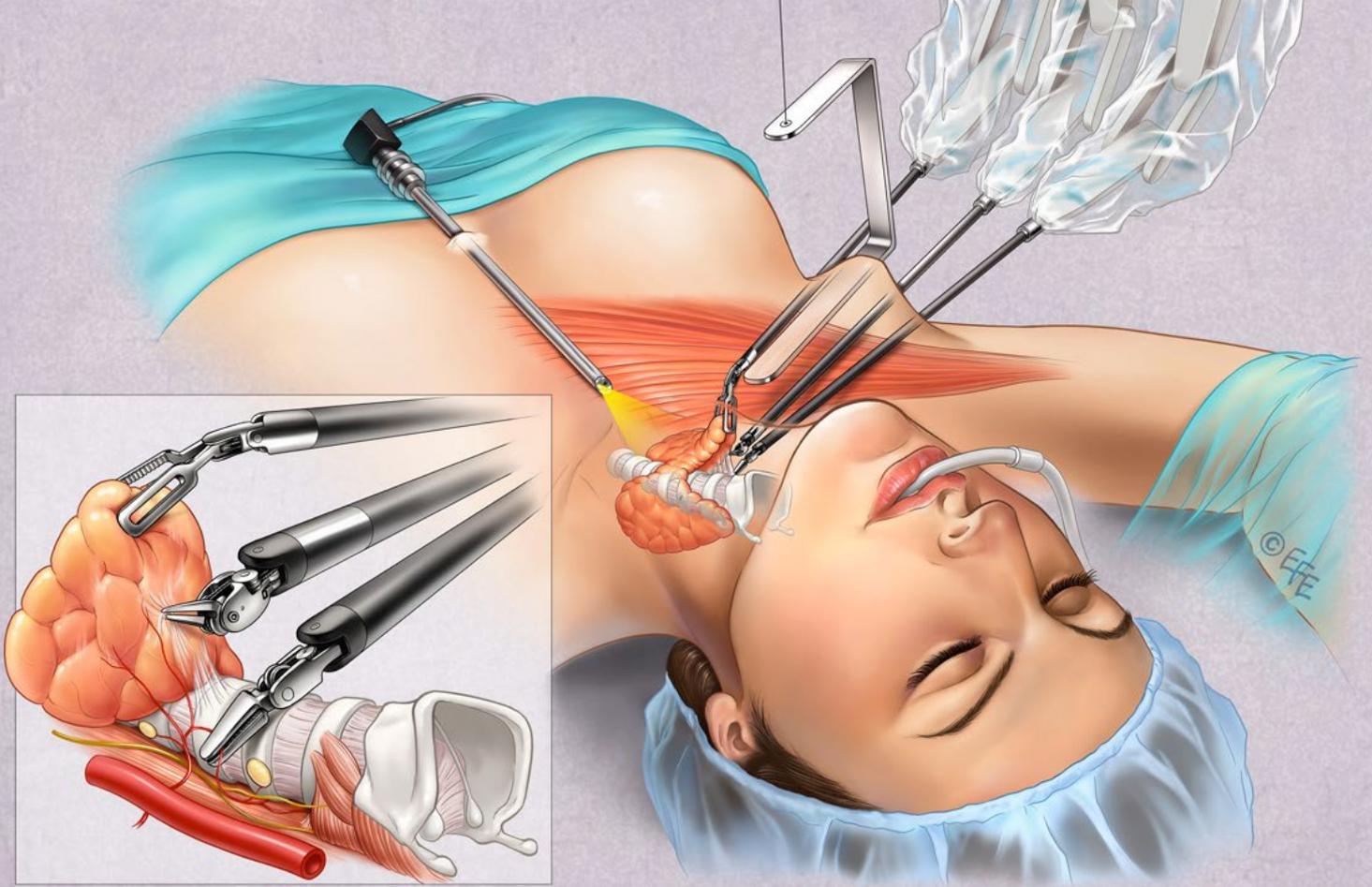
**Outline:** What projects are you currently working on, or looking forward to down the track?

**Levent:** I have just started illustrating a Neurology textbook for an overseas author. Other projects of varying sizes need attention as well; several journal articles, and patient education images for the web. It is always ideal to have a variety of projects on board in order to keep afloat, as well as inspired.

As always, there is a good number of projects waiting at the 'negotiating phase'. Some we will proceed with, and some will not; mostly due to factors like cost or copyright details.

What I look forward to do in my work is more interactivity and more advanced usage of social media.

**Outline:** For any aspiring illustrators hoping to work in the medical illustration field, can you recommend any courses/online resources or anything else?



**Levent:** There still is no educational program here in Australia, unfortunately. Freelance work kept us distracted for years, and developing such a program could not be possible.

Best graduate level programs are in North America, and they could be viewed through the AMI site ([ami.org](http://ami.org)). In Europe meanwhile, many programs have recently closed down, and only one in Holland is still in action.

The skills required can be gained through a tailored set of programs, and I know at least two artists doing that in Australia.

Medical illustration is an extremely exciting niche for visually talented communicators. None of us are able to guess what is in store for the next few decades, but I can assure any aspiring talent that there will more fantastic and innovative ways of communicating medicine visually by then. 📍

**{ ▶️CLICK! }** Levent Efe

Website <http://www.leventefe.com.au>

