Jan F.S. Esser (1877-1946) was a remarkable and gifted Dutch surgeon whose contributions to plastic and reconstructive surgery, made long before this specialty was recognised as a branch of surgery, are part of our surgical heritage. His interest in the blood supply of skin flaps was the forerunner of the clinical and anatomical research that led to the definition of the axial pattern flap, the island flap, and later the work on myocutaneous flaps. Esser was one of the first physicians in Holland to have studied both dentistry and medicine, a unique and fortunate combination that lead him to invent the skin graft inlay technique: an operation that is still named after him. His dexterity and love for manual craftsmanship is reflected in his beautiful leatherbound collection of atlases of war injuries, made by the old master bookbinders in Antwerp. He was an eminent chess player and at one time chess champion of Holland. He was also dedicated to the arts and a very shrewd businessman. He was a tireless and energetic worker, but at the same time a rugged individualist, and at times hopelessly unrealistic. His suspicious attitude, hotheadedness, and occasional stinginess were among his other weaknesses. In the international literature on plastic surgery he is quoted as being one of the pioneers and inventors of reconstructive surgery, of the same stature as Joseph and Lexer in Germany, Gillies and Kilner in Great Britain, Morestin in France, Burian in Czechoslovakia and Staige Davis in the United States of America. Yet in his native country, Holland, he was barely noticed. He travelled all over the world with the aim of spreading, on the basis of his personal experience, the possibilities of plastic and reconstructive surgery, especially in Europe and both Americas, for the surgical treatment, rehabilitation and return to society of the mutilated war victims who were regarded as outcasts of society in those days. (Aufricht, 1946b). The development of the Esser-inlay, published in both the German and American surgical journals, marked the beginning of an era in plastic surgery and was used extensively throughout the First and Second World War. His discovery of the "biological" arterial flap, used then as a pedicled flap and more recently as a free flap has revolutionized reconstructive surgery. Another of his innovations, the bilobed flap, is still used extensively for the reconstruction of certain facial and nasal defects. Esser did not invent surgical instruments, but restated and defined surgical principles instead.
The techniques Esser developed for reconstructing facial defects are well known to plastic surgeons [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. So Esser attracted the attention of three university professors in Berlin. Because of these innovative techniques, they offered him a position in 1917 as head physician for plastic surgery. Yet, Berlin medical history today does not sufficiently credit Esser for his achievements in disseminating the knowledge of plastic surgery, as both the physician and his work were forgotten in Berlin after the Second World War. Haeseker B (1983) Dr. JFS Esser and his influence on the development of plastic and reconstructive surgery. Med. dissertation, Rotterdam, p 60. Google Scholar. 10. At the same time the British plastic surgeon Harold Delfs Gillies used the Esser-graft to school all those who flocked towards him who wanted to study under him. That’s how he earned the name “Father of 20th Century Plastic Surgery”. In 1919 Dr. Passot was known to publish one of the first papers on face-lifting, this consisted mainly on the elevating and redraping of the facial skin. After this many others began to write papers on face-lifting in the 1920s. Transactions of 7th international conference on Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. ^ Heinrichs, HL; Kaidi, AA (September 1998). “Subperiosteal face lift: a 200-case 4-years review”. Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. 102 (3): 843–55. doi:10.1097/00006534-199809030-00036. PMID 9727455.