

News, Notes, and Queries

Medical Archives and MSS News, 2010

The value of health archives for research may seem self-evident to readers of *Medical History*, but this is not always true of those who have responsibility for them during their life as active administrative records. Department of Health guidance on required standards for records management in NHS organisations in England urges staff to consult a local record office or The National Archives if 'records have no ongoing administrative value but have or may have long-term historical or research value'. Archivists and historians have long felt that important records slip through this net because of a lack of comprehension as to what constitutes 'research value'. At the very tail end of 2009, the Health Archives and Records Group (<http://www.healtharchives.org/>) launched guidance on *The Value of Health Archives for Research*. This outlines various ways in which such archives may be used to further clinical, academic and general understanding of the past. It is hoped that this publication will be a useful tool in raising awareness amongst records creators, custodians and users alike.

That many archives continue successfully to bridge this gap of understanding and develop fruitful relationships with local health-care providers is evident in the steady stream of hospital archives that are listed in The National Archives annual 'Accessions to Repositories' survey (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/accessions/2009/09digests/medic.htm>). In addition to traditional series of hospital administrative and patient records, material that reflects more recent developments is beginning to trickle through, such as the minutes and papers of the Central and North West London Mental Health NHS Trust Patient and Public Involvement Forum, 2004–2006, which have been deposited in London Metropolitan Archives (Acc B09/036). The rise of local

consumer activism is also illustrated by the records of the North Woodspring Community Health Group, who campaigned to retain health services at Ham Green Hospital in the early 1990s, now with Bristol Record Office (Ref. 44072). It is notable also that nineteenth-century hospital records are still being transferred in number, particularly from smaller cottage hospitals. Examples include the records of Cray Valley Cottage Hospital (Ref. INCVH) and Erith Cottage Hospital (Ref. INEDH), deposited in Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre, and those of Fordingbridge Cottage Hospital (Ref. 177A09), dating from 1866 and now with Hampshire Record Office.

Keeping track of the location of such records has long been the aim of the Hospital Records Database, jointly managed by The National Archives and the Wellcome Trust (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords/>). During the year this invaluable resource was enhanced by the creation of links to information in the Voluntary Hospitals Database, developed by the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (<http://www.hospitalsdatabase.lshtm.ac.uk/>). This new database provides a rich resource of statistical data relating to Voluntary Hospitals between the 1890s and the inception of the NHS, and has manifold uses from answering simple queries to undertaking more complex analyses.

The 'Accessions to Repositories' survey does not always specify the medium of the records acquired, but it may be inferred that the vast majority are still in traditional paper, or other analogue, format. During 2010, the Wellcome Library received its very first entirely digital archive accession: the papers—if we can still label them as such—of a member of faculty of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute. Overall, however, UK

archives remain woefully under-prepared for the challenge of born-digital archives and it remains to be seen whether the electronic patient records being created today will survive to feature in the Hospital Records Database of the future. At the other end of the spectrum, the Wellcome Library was one of only five repositories to report the acquisition of any pre-nineteenth-century material. In this category, receipt books remain popular with acquisitions being made by Bath Record Office (Acc 797) and Glasgow University Library (Ms Gen 575) as well as the Wellcome (MS.8685 and MS.8687).

In addition to building collections, archives continue to use the opportunities provided by digital technologies and the number of online resources available to historians of medicine continues to grow. The Wellcome Library has, for example, launched an ambitious digitisation project on the theme of 'Modern Genetics and its Foundations', which will provide free access to the content of 1,400 books on genetics and heredity published between 1850 and 1990, along with important archives, including the papers of Francis Crick and Frederick Sanger. The Library hopes that the start of this project will mark the first step on the path to online access to all of its unique collections and the launch was marked by an audio slideshow on the BBC's website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-11016755>).

Thanks to funding from the Wellcome Trust's Research Resources in Medical History (RRMH) grants scheme, other archives have also been able to open up their holdings. The National Archives, for example, has made accessible over a thousand journals compiled by Royal Navy surgeons and assistant surgeons who served on HM ships, hospitals, naval brigades, shore parties and on emigrant and convict ships in the period 1793 to 1880 (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/surgeonsatsea/>). Amidst colourful stories of ship life, including various rum-related incidents, venereal disease, shark bites, tarantulas, gunfights and mutiny, the journals contain much material of fundamental interest to the historian of

medicine. To accompany a detailed online catalogue, which may be searched by disease and ailment as well as by the name of the medical officer, patient and ship, a selection of files have been digitised and these are available to view online in their entirety. Through such projects, the RRMH scheme, which also supported the Voluntary Hospitals Database, continues to provide much-needed funding to the sector. During 2010, it funded several important new projects in relation to the theme of genetics and announced the timetable for a further call on the topic of 'understanding the brain' (<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/Medical-history-and-humanities/Funding-schemes/Support-for-archives-and-records/index.htm>).

The Centre for Scientific Archives (CSA) at the Science Museum, the establishment of which was sparked by the closure of the National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists during 2009 as reported last year, was awarded charitable status in October 2010. It is hoped that this will enable it to apply for an expanded range of funding as the Trustees attempt to develop a sustainable future for the cataloguing of scientific papers (contact Anne Barrett, Chairman of Trustees, for more information: a.barrett@imperial.ac.uk).

All these laudable attempts to open up access to content are, however, resource-intensive and, during 2010, it became apparent that, in a changed political and economic climate, funding for even core archival services could not be taken for granted. The archive sector as a whole absorbed the impact of the abolition of the MLA, at least one local authority record office was threatened with being 'out-sourced', and budget cuts loomed large for national, local, university and specialist archives alike. Against this background health archives may be particularly at risk. Bulky series of patient case records require extensive long-term investment in their storage and preservation. Many cannot be made fully publicly accessible, and thus be seen to earn their keep, for up to a hundred years. The personal papers

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of bio-medical scientists may at first sight appear to appeal to a relatively narrow audience and investment in their acquisition and cataloguing may be considered a low priority. The records of small health organisations and single-issue pressure groups tend to fall through the net entirely unless there are adequate resources devoted to seeking them out and steering them into an

appropriate home. If there is a single message to be communicated by events in 2010 it is that medical archive and manuscript collections need your active support perhaps more now than ever before.

Jennifer Haynes,
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**Announcement of European
Association for the History of Medicine and Health
Biennial Conference, 2011**

The European Association for the History of Medicine and Health will hold their 2011 Biennial Conference in Utrecht, The Netherlands on the 1–4 September 2011. Co-organised by the Descartes Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities and by the University Medical Centre Utrecht, the

Conference's general theme will be 'Body and Mind in the History of Medicine and Health'. The keynote speakers include Floris Cohen, Jacalyn Duffin, Annemarie Mol and Roger Smith. For more details, please see Association's website (<http://www.eahmh.net/>).