

News, Notes, and Queries

Medical Archives and MSS News, 2009

Archives in the UK have never been more visible. From increasing government and official attention, stimulated in part by the perceived utility of local archives for community cohesion, to exposure in the media, such as the BBC series *Who Do You Think You Are?* the existence of huge historical documentary resources and their potential for personal and specialist study is becoming better known. The Government's consultation document, *Archives in the 21st Century* <http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/strategies/~media/Files/pdf/2009/archives-for-the-21st-century-england>, published in 2009, highlighted some of the major opportunities and challenges for the archives sector. In 2010 there will be a particular focus on science archives as the annual Archives Awareness Campaign run by the National Archives and the official agency MLA will be devoted to that theme. Stand by for a plethora of exhibitions and events that surface science-based collections in local and national archives repositories towards the end of the year.

The annual digest of Accessions to Repositories in 2008 in the health and medical field, published by The National Archives, contains a predictable menu of accessions of hospital records by local record offices, spiced with the occasional nursing or St John's Ambulance association minute book. A few items stand out on the page, though there is no way of telling from the digest alone how substantial a potential research resource they represent. Records of the Royal Eastern Counties Institution for Mental Defectives, Colchester, from 1896 (Essex Record Office) may be of interest to the burgeoning field of research in the history of the treatment of mental retardation. Notice of the accession of records of Vale House Alzheimers Home, Botley (Oxfordshire Record Office), on the other hand, may

indicate the shape of things to come. Another sign of the changing landscape of medical provision is represented by records of the Princess Alice Hospice, Esher, c.1981–99 (Surrey History Centre). Meanwhile accession by Nottinghamshire Archives of registers and case papers of Rampton Hospital from 1915 to 2000 means presumably that the full archival record of the treatment of the criminally insane in England during the last century will soon become available to historians, albeit under the usual restrictions; Broadmoor's records are already lodged in Berkshire Record Office.

Among accessions of personal papers, the eye readily alights on correspondence and papers of John Moore (1729–1802), physician and father of General Sir John Moore (Cambridge University Library), and personal and family correspondence and papers of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, c.1861–1916 (Suffolk Record Office). Not to be outdone in the celebrity stakes, the Wellcome Library reports that it acquired records of interesting cases by Sir Bernard Spilsbury, the forensic pathologist who dominated the field in the early twentieth century and established the template for the expert witness, 1905–32. The Wellcome is the only repository to record significant accessions from non-public medical organizations or institutions, an area that has long been its speciality: the records of the Biochemical Society and the British Psychological Society are but two of the NGOs whose archives now find a place on the Wellcome's shelves, giving that repository's holdings a depth and texture beyond comparison.

One of the major news stories of the year concerned the threat of closure of the National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists (NCUACS), whose activities have been well-known to medical archivists for over three decades. The Unit was founded in 1973 in response to a concern among scientists and historians that archives

of distinguished British scientists and engineers were being lost through lack of interest and expertise among archivists working in established repositories. Operating at first from Oxford and latterly the University of Bath, NCUACS identified and processed almost 300 collections of personal papers, including those of twenty-five Nobel laureates, and arranged for their deposit in publicly-accessible archive repositories throughout the land. Many of these collections relate to eminent medical scientists, from Sir Ernst Chain to Sir Hans Krebs and César Milstein. The threatened demise of NCUACS was precipitated by a funding crisis at the Unit and need for economies at the University of Bath. But in the long view it is clear that NCUACS's problems were to some extent a function of its very success, as the consciousness-raising among members of the archives profession that was part of its remit has been so far achieved that no self-respecting university or national archive repository would now eschew the papers of scientists. This is as it should be, as future generations will surely look back on the twentieth century as pre-eminently the century of science. At the same time, historians are no longer satisfied to view science as a series of individual stories of the achievements of eminent men, and it is fair to say that the FRS-chasing of the NCUACS approach has for some years seemed rather out of date. Towards the end of the year it was announced that NCUACS was to be reconstituted as Scientific Archives @ the Science Museum and the Unit based at the Science Museum site at Wroughton, Swindon. It remains to be seen how the direction, style and activities of the new Unit will differ from the old.

Towards the end of 2009 the Wellcome Trust announced that its funding scheme for supporting preservation and cataloguing of research collections, Research Resources for Medical History (RRMH) would be repurposed as a scheme to support the strategic digitization plans of the Wellcome Library. From inception in 2000 to 2007 (the last year for which details are

publicly available) RRMH made 111 awards ranging from a few thousand pounds to over £100,000. Among these were grants for some of the best known collections in the country, such as the Harleian manuscripts in the British Library, some of the most prestigious medical institutions, such as the Royal College of Physicians, and for the records of some of the most high-profile hospitals, such as Broadmoor. In addition, awards were made to a range of national, NHS, university, local government and private institutions that are responsible for the care of medically-related holdings. A survey of outputs based on recently completed projects revealed that in addition to standard cataloguing and conservation, website development, digitisation, conferences and exhibitions were funded. Impacts included the employment of permanent members of staff post-project, conferences, papers, journal articles, books, exhibitions, media attention and a nomination for the Gulbenkian Prize 2007.

Another on-line digital collection of historical correspondence of potential interest to medical historians became available during the year. *Electronic Enlightenment (EE)* is a subscription product from Oxford University Press but access is available free of charge in the Wellcome Library and other subscribing institutions. It aims to document as richly as possible the correspondence networks of leading protagonists of the long eighteenth century: strictly speaking *EE* is not a manuscripts-based product as it is founded on existing published editions of letters. There are well over 6,000 individual correspondents included, though the limitations of the sources mean that coverage is heavily weighted towards the political, literary and philosophical fields: there are for instance almost 19,000 letters by or to Voltaire in the database but none of Jenner's. The resource, nevertheless, provides useful approaches for medical historians, as even in the absence of many medical correspondents as such the keyword search facility allows minute interrogation of a huge amount of text in a way impossible via normal library catalogues or even digital surrogates on-line without accompanying

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transcription. A search for 'Bedlam' for instance brings up over forty letters written from 1659 to 1808 in the correspondence of

figures like Locke, Swift and Bentham. More nuanced searches can be effected using a variety of date and word controls.

Fourth International Conference on the
History of Occupational and
Environmental Health

The Fourth International Conference on the History of Occupational and Environmental Health will take place on 19–22 June 2010, including a half-day pre-meeting workshop on

Occupational and Environmental History Methods on June 19. Organized by the University of California San Francisco, further information can be found at: <https://www.cme.ucsf.edu/cme/>