

Identify medical objects in museum collections

Museums with medical collections

While there are a number of specialist health and medicine museums in Australia, there are also many local historical museums with medical, nursing, pharmaceutical and hospital items in their collections. These objects can tell important stories about a locality's history—stories about hospitals and baby health clinics that were features of community life; medical practitioners who presided over births, illness and deaths in the area; pharmacies that were an integral part of the business community; women who were the principal custodians of their family's health.

The need to identify objects

For lay people working in museums, these items can sometimes be difficult to identify or give a date to. If objects cannot be identified, their value to the collection is compromised and their potential for research and display is reduced. As a result they may be overlooked when objects are being chosen for exhibitions, they may be labeled incorrectly or inadequately in displays, or they may languish amongst the museum's store of 'mystery items'.

Another important reason why it is important to identify medical and pharmaceutical objects—some of them may pose a risk to people or to other museum objects. The key to safety is awareness of any potential hazards so that risks can be managed appropriately.

Documenting acquisitions

The best way to avoid having mystery items in your collection is to document objects when they are acquired. Even if there is not time to fully research the object, it is important to record what is known about it. A pair of obstetric forceps is an interesting item to have in a collection, but they are of much greater value if you record, for example, that they 'belonged to general practitioner Dr George ----- who had a practice in the town between 1929 and 1946 and delivered many of the district's babies'. They are of even greater value if you acquire Dr -----'s bag complete with all of its contents and keep them together.

Details about the ownership and use of objects are important even if their owners were not notable people. An unusual ultra-violet therapeutic device may be a great curiosity to have on display, but its value to future generations is greatly enhanced if it is recorded that it 'was amongst the effects of the donor's aunt, Ms -----; the donor believes his aunt bought it around 1950 when she first got arthritis'.

It is a good idea to ask donors to write down what they know about the ownership, use and function of an object when donating it; or to take notes while you get them to tell you about it.

With personal items, donors will sometimes tell you who the owner was but ask that this information not be made public. You should honour this request and record it in your documentation of the object.

Detective work

Of course, none of this helps if you are trying to identify items that have already been in the collection for some time. In these circumstances, detective work is required. If possible, it is a good idea to go back to the original donor for more information. They may know more than they (or you) think. Scraps of information can help identify and date objects. A box of instruments from 'the store room at Hospital A' may turn out, when the donor is pressed for details, to have 'arrived at Hospital A when Hospital B closed down in 1979'.

If it is not possible to contact original donors, there are other people who may be able to provide information about particular objects. Staff and former staff of a hospital where a piece of equipment originated from may remember what the machine was used for and when. Family members and other people in the community may be able to tell you when particular doctors or health care workers practiced and what the nature of their practice was.

It is important to record stories about objects now, while that information is still held in people's memories. The information you gather becomes, as it were, part of each object. It will help with the interpretation of objects when they are used in exhibitions, it will be used as a starting point when you or others are researching more in-depth information, and it will assist people of future generations understand the significance of the objects that your museum has saved and cared for.

Nevertheless, you should allow for the fact that information you are given may be incorrect or misremembered. When recording information you should also record the source of that information. For example, 'According to Mrs -----, her late father Mr ----- moved to this town and opened his chemist shop in 1949'; 'Graeme ---- (b. 1944) recalls being fitted for these, his first pair of polio leg braces, when he was 6 years old'.

Enlisting helpers

When there is no way of finding stories that are specific to an object in your collection, it is still possible to find general and technical information about that kind of object.

Retired pharmacists, doctors and nurses are often happy to help with the identification of mystery items. Theatre sisters, in particular, are often better at identifying surgical instruments than surgeons themselves. Seeking help like this can be a way of enlisting aid from community members who might not be interested in volunteering for other aspects of your museum's work. A notice in your local newspaper could help bring such people to light.

Nevertheless, even the experts sometimes need to refer to pharmacopoeias, surgical instrument catalogues and manufacturers' handbooks. Identification and dating are simplified if printed material like this is available. The Powerhouse Museum Research Library in Sydney is one place where there is a good collection of such reference books, with some old pharmacopoeias and instrument catalogues dating back to the late 19th century. Some of these catalogues are available

for volunteer-managed museums to borrow free of charge. An inter-library loan can be arranged through your local library. The Powerhouse Library is also open to visitors by appointment on weekdays (see contact details on page three).

Good sources of information about old medical equipment can be found on-line. You can use the Internet to help you find history of medicine sites, medical antiques, pharmaceutical collectibles, manufacturers' web pages and much more. Like any source of information, on-line sources should be examined for their reliability so it's important to record the page address (the url) of the information as well as checking up to see if the authors of the site are well-known and recognized.

Help from further afield

Finally, there are organisations that may be able to help with your mystery medical items. Some might be able to send a person to visit your museum; some will try to assist with identification from a photograph. If sending a photograph, include any information you have about the object. For instance:

- Where it came from
- How long it has been in your collection
- Any ideas about what people think it is, or what it was used for
- A transcription of any writing or marks on the object or its packaging.

Organisations that can offer help are listed below.

Australian Society of Anaesthetists

The ASA established the Harry Daly Museum which is devoted to the preservation, documentation and interpretation of the history of anaesthetic practice. Much of the collection is viewable online at eHive. If you have any equipment that you suspect relates to anaesthesia or resuscitation they will help you identify it. At the same time they are happy to help identify other surgical and medical artefacts. Anna Gebels is the current curator.

Phone: 1800 806 654

Email: asa@asa.org.au

Website: www.asa.org.au

Address: P.O. Box 76, St Leonards, NSW, 1590

Open: Weekdays, 9am-5pm

Megan Hicks

Megan Hicks, is past Curator of Health and Medicine at the Powerhouse Museum. Megan now works as a freelance consultant to museums.

Phone: 0428 647 747

Email: megan@meganix.net

Pharmaceutical Services Branch, NSW Department of Health

The Duty Pharmacist will give advice on medications and drugs in your collection and can assist with identifying those that may be harmful.

Fax: 02 9424 5860

Email: MOH-PharmaceuticalServices@health.nsw.gov.au

Website: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pharmaceutical/pages/default.aspx>

Address: Locked Bag 2030, St Leonards NSW 1590

SPASM (Society for the Preservation of Artifacts of Surgery and Medicine)

This volunteer group of doctors and theatre nurses has a small museum in Building 6, Gladesville Hospital, Victoria Road, Gladesville, NSW. The collection includes in excess of 7000 objects, documents, photographs, portraits and books. The museum is open on the 2nd Saturday & 4th Monday from 11am to 3pm (public holidays excluded) between February and November; or by appointment. SPASM may be able to find a theatre sister who lives somewhere in your locality and is willing to help with identifications.

Curator: Dr Bevan Stone

Phone: 0414 993 138

Email: info@spasmmuseum.org.au

Website: www.spasmmuseum.org.au

You might also like:

Hazardous materials–Written reference list Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-materialswritten-reference-list/>

Hazardous material assistance and advice organisations Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-material-assistance-and-advice-organisations/>

Hazardous materials in medical collections Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-materials-medical-collections/>

Collections management Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-management/>