

IDENTIFYING 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. Such 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 labelled incorrectly or inadequately in displays, or they may languish amongst the museum's store of 'mystery items'.

There is another 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. The MGF Fact Sheet 'Guidelines for dealing with hazardous objects in medical collections' provides advice on this subject.

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'. (And 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. MGF Fact Sheets on 'Collections management' provide guidance on what sort of questions to ask donors.

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 below).

The World Wide Web can also be a good source of information about old medical equipment. If you have access to the Internet your favourite search engine will help you find history of medicine sites, medical antiques, pharmaceutical collectibles, manufacturers' web pages and much more.

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 an 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.

Some of these organisations that can offer help are listed below.

CONTACT DETAILS

Australian Society of Anaesthetics History of Anaesthesia Library, Museum and Archives (ASAHALMA)

The ASAHALMA committee is trying to locate anaesthesia and resuscitation equipment held in collections around Australia. Their aim is to develop a database recording the nature of the equipment and where it is housed. 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. Allison Bartlett is the curator at the History of Anaesthesia Library, Museum and Archives.

Phone: 02 9327 4022

Email: abartlett@fed.asa.org.au

Postal address: Curator, ASAHALMA, PO Box 600, Edgecliff NSW 2027

Australian Academy of the History of Pharmacy (AAHP)

Within the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia there is a sub-committee called the Australian Academy of the History of Pharmacy. The AAHP has a list of pharmacists and retired pharmacists who may be able to help identify pharmacy and apothecary items. If nobody in Australia can help, the AAHP can enlist the aid of overseas colleagues. The AAHP contact person is Mr Geoff Miller.

Phone: 08 9386 6078

Fax: 08 9386 1209

Email: gcmiller@iinet.net.au

Postal address: AAHP, c/- Mr Geoff Miller, 8 Leopold Street, Nedlands WA 6009

Health and Medicine Museums Special Interest Group (HMM)

HMM is a Special Interest Group of Museums Australia Inc that provides a network for people interested in preserving the heritage of health and medicine. HMM can help identify objects by circulating your enquiry to its members around Australia. As well, the Victorian Chapter of HMM keeps a list of medical equipment catalogues held in various institutions around that state.

Phone: 03 9864 9649

Fax: 03 9864 9650

Email: Anna.Fairclough@visionaustralia.org.au

Postal address: Hon. Secretary, HMM, PO Box A2339, Sydney South NSW 1235

Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW

Regional Services staff at MGF can provide advice and field visits on all types of museum operations including collection management and conservation.

Phone: 02 9358 1760

Freecall: 1800 114 311

Fax: 02 9358 1852

Email: Peter Scrivener regional3@mgfnsw.org.au

Sarah-Jane Rennie regional2@mgfnsw.org.au

Rebecca Jones regional1@mgfnsw.org.au

Postal address: 43-51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo NSW 2011

Website: www.mgfnsw.org.au

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. One of the Duty Pharmacists, Mr Ian Anderson, also has a personal interest in old pharmaceutical curiosities.

Phone: 02 9879 3214

Fax: 02 9859 5165

Email: iande@doh.health.gov.au (Ian Anderson)

Postal address: PO Box 103, Gladesville NSW 2111

Powerhouse Museum

Curator of health and medicine

Curator Megan Hicks is happy to discuss matters relating to health and medicine collections and exhibitions, or to help find someone who can provide appropriate advice.

Phone: 02 9217 0254

Fax: 02 9217 0355

Email: meganh@phm.gov.au

Postal address: Megan Hicks, Powerhouse Museum, PO Box K346, Haymarket NSW 1238

Research Library

The Powerhouse Research Library holds a substantial collection of books and periodicals on all aspects of museology (theoretical and practical) that would be of use to museum people. The library is open on weekdays. Visits (by appointment) and any enquiries for information are most welcome. In addition,

publications can be borrowed on inter-library loan.

Phone: 02 9217 0258

Fax: 02 9217 0433

Email: ResearchLibrary@phm.gov.au

Postal address: Research Library, Powerhouse Museum, PO Box K346, Haymarket NSW 1238

Regional Programs Coordinator

For organisations in NSW regional areas, the Museum's Regional Services Coordinator, Rebecca Pinchin, is the first point of contact for information and advice.

Phone: 02 9217 0220

Freecall: 1800 882 092

Email: rebeccap@phm.gov.au

Powerhouse Museum general

Switchboard: 02 9217 0111

Website: www.phm.gov.au

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

This volunteer group of doctors and theatre nurses has a small museum in Gladesville, Sydney. The museum is open by appointment. Contact Hon. Curator Mrs Judith Cornell AM if you would like to visit and view their collection of instruments. SPASM may also be able to find a theatre sister who lives somewhere in your locality and is willing to help with identifications.

Phone/fax: 02 9587 2834

Email: cornell@netspace.net.au

Related Fact Sheets available from MGF

Guidelines for dealing with hazardous materials in medical collections

Acknowledgments

This Fact Sheet was written by Megan Hicks, Curator of health and medicine at the Powerhouse Museum, while on secondment as a Regional Services Officer at the Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW.

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