

Medical history collections of the Medical University Vienna in transition

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Abstract

A short survey of several important medical history collections in Vienna, notably those of the Josephinum.

Since the end of the 18th century collections in the field of academic medicine have been of special importance, for instance, in anatomy. When speaking of collections today we have to distinguish between existing authentic collections originally used for teaching purposes and others documenting the history of medicine or a special field of medicine. There are several important medical history collections in Vienna.

The Federal Museum of Pathological Anatomy, which was founded approximately thirty years ago, is at its core a teaching collection for the Institute of Pathological Anatomy. The Federal Museum of Pathological Anatomy is not, however, affiliated with the university and it has its own budget, which enables it to build up and enlarge the collections.

Another collection of special importance is the collection of the former Institute (now Department) of Forensic Medicine. It is the world's largest collection dealing with forensic medicine, and is still used for teaching purposes. The objects date back to the second half of the 19th century.

The collection of the Museum of Dentistry and Dental Surgery is yet another example of a museum devoted to a medical specialism. Although part of the University Clinic of *Zahn-, Mund- und Kieferheilkunde* it is under the auspices of the Committee for the History of Dentistry which is part of the Austrian Association of *Zahn-, Mund- und Kieferheilkunde*. The origins of the collection date back to the middle of the 19th century and to the founder of dentistry in Vienna, Georg Carabelli, but modern developments are also documented. Of particular interest is a collection of moulages of mouth and jaw injuries from victims of the First World War. They were used as teaching aids for the training of dentists and dental surgeons.

Several historic collections have been destroyed or are stored elsewhere. The large teaching collection of the Institute of Anatomy, for instance, was almost completely destroyed by a bomb at the end of the Second World War. What remained is now in the Federal Museum of Pathological Anatomy. The Museum of Electro-Pathology was established at the beginning of the 20th century by the founder of the specialty of Electro-Pathology, Stefan Jellinek. The exhibits were greatly diminished due to separation of the museum from the university followed by several relocations. What survived is now in the possession of the *Technisches Museum Wien*.

One of the oldest existing collections acquired for teaching purposes is the collection of anatomical and obstetric wax models of the former Medico-Surgical Joseph's Academy, or Josephinum. The Academy was opened in 1785 with the aim of improving both the status and the skills of army surgeons who did not have medical degrees and were organized in craftsmen's guilds. In order to offer the future military surgeons the best possible anatomical teaching, the Academy's founder, Joseph II, commissioned from Florence a collection of 1,192 anatomical and obstetric wax models.

The wax models were made by using moulds taken from cadavers or by using drawings from anatomy books. They are not only a document of the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment but are also of high historico-cultural value. They represent in original size and color an anatomical encyclopedia in three

dimensions. Originally they were displayed in seven large rooms in the Josephinum. The order in which they were displayed resembled the chapters of an anatomical textbook. Colored drawings and hand-written explanations corresponding to the wax models helped the students to perfect their knowledge in anatomy. Today the collection still comprises approximately 1,000 specimens in six rooms.

A related collection of rare books and surgical instruments dates back to the foundation of the Josephinum. The instruments are still in their original boxes. They are depicted and described in a tome with the title *Instrumentarium chirurgicum viennense oder Wienerische chirurgische Instrumenten-Sammlung*, published by the first director of the Josephinum, Johann Alexander Brambilla, in 1781. This rare book is in our library.

Thanks to Max Neuburger, then head of the Institute for the History of Medicine, which has been located in the Josephinum since 1920, this Institute soon became a well-known center for medical history. Neuburger combined his own collections – medical instruments, books and pictures which he had been collecting since 1906 - with those of the former Joseph's Academy.

From 1962 to 1965 the Josephinum was completely renovated and revitalised under Erna Lesky, who at that time was head of the Institute. The wax models were restored and newly displayed. From the rich holdings of objects, books and pictures in the possession of the Institute, a documented history of the so-called first and second Vienna Medical School was set up in two rooms. The collections grew continuously, in particular due to donations from several university clinics and further when the old General Hospital moved to new premises.

The budget for the collections and the museum – by museum we refer only to the rooms open to the public – has never extended beyond the provision of funding for the restoration of the wax models and the position of a warden.

In recent years new collections dealing with special topics of medicine, such as endoscopy, anaesthesiology and intensive care medicine, and ethnomedicine, were established through the initiative of Institute staff members, and with funding from sponsors. An international research society (Internationale Nitze-Leiter-Forschungsgesellschaft) was founded in order to co-operate with the Institute for the History of Medicine in the field of endoscopic research. Close co-operation with other professional groups and experts was also established. These collections have the status of associated collections.

At the end of the 20th century the old General Hospital moved to new premises. At that time the university and the medical faculty had plans to combine the existing medical collections, pursue the concept of a *Medizinisches Zentralmuseum* which would also include part of the old *Garnisonsspital*, located between the *Josephinum* and the so-called *Narrenturm*. The plan was never realized. When at the beginning of this century Medical Faculties became independent Medical Universities in Austria, new and larger organizational units were formed within the Medical University of Vienna. The Institute for the History of Medicine became a sub-unit of the unit Public Health, to which, for instance the Institute for Environmental Toxicology also belongs, to name just one out of the eight sub-units. In January 2007 yet another step towards restructuring was taken: all the collections of the Institute for the History of Medicine were assigned to the Library of the Medical University and became a sub-unit of the library as *Collections of the Medical University Vienna – Josephinum* which means they are no longer part of the medico-historical institute.

One may argue that by doing so the Medical University shows a higher appreciation for its cultural heritage. While this may be true, the Institute for the History of Medicine is now deprived of essential resources which it needs for scientific research, reflection, and documentation. What is the advantage

of assigning the collections to a different organizational unit, namely the Library of the Medical University, to the detriment of the Institute which has been housing and successfully administering them since 1920? We are concerned with regard to the future handling of the collections as well as the continuation of the long-standing co-operation and contacts with associated collections and similar institutions all over the world.

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