

Heritage and human remains. The challenges of historical and biomedical research in medical collections and biobanks.

26 January 2024

Auditoire Julliard, Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève,
Geneva, Switzerland



FINAL PROGRAMME

- 9:00-9:10 Welcome
- 9:10-9:30 Introductory paper
Issues of tissues under the microscope. The challenges of reviving Strasbourg's neglected pathological anatomy collection
Tricia Close-Koenig & Déborah Dubald, University of Strasbourg
- Session 1
- Moderator: **Eva Åhrén**, Director, Medical History and Heritage, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm
- 9:30-10:00 *The Geneva Brain Bank: Evolution from a neuropathology research laboratory to a modern brain bank*
Christophe Lamy, Geneva Brain Bank, Faculté de Médecine, Université de Genève and Hôpitaux Universitaires de Genève
- 10:00-10:40 *Researching UCL pathology collections: Development of policies and procedures through lessons learned*
Emilia Kingham, Conservator, UCL Science and Pathology Collections, London & **Liz Blanks (née Eastlake)**, Curator, UCL Science and Pathology Collections, London"
- 10:40-11:00 Coffee break
- 11:00-11:30 *The evolution of biobanking in Iceland: From small collections to big promises*
Henry Alexander Henrysson, Research Specialist, The Centre for Ethics, University of Iceland
- 11:30-11:50 Commentary by **Manon Parry**, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam
- 12:00-13:30 Lunch break
- Session 2
- Moderator: **Ricardo Roque**, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon
- 13:30-14:10 *What if those slides are less than 100 years old? Navigating the UK Human Tissue Act*
Stephanie Seville, Heritage Officer, Museum of Medicine and Health, University of Manchester & **Carsten Timmermann**, Director, Centre for the History of Science, Technology & Medicine, University of Manchester
- 14:10-14:40 *Sample, source and interdisciplinary connections in a bottle*
Karin Tybjerg, Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen
- 14:45-15:00 Coffee break
- 15:00-15:20 Commentary by **Bruno Strasser**, University of Geneva
- 15:20-16:45 General discussion moderated by **Tricia Close-Koenig & Déborah Dubald**
- 17:00 End

**Observation by anthropologist, Marie Durand, Université de Strasbourg.

Abstract

Human biological samples are human remains, and as such, a particular type of object (or preparation) with particular status (a status often dependent on their location). This workshop will focus on the case of historical medical collections, or tissue collections collected in medical practice. These collections might be identified as (but not limited to) part of a medical museum and thereby as a heritage collection, part of a biological archive for healthcare, or part of a biobank for medical research. Outside the medical community, it may be difficult to answer the question of the acceptability of preserving tissue samples (as human remains) and integrating them into collections. In the context of the Neverending infectious diseases project, we have been confronted with the challenges of using a historical medical collection for biomedical research. Historical collections have a rich potential for current and future research, but their use is far from straightforward. This is a relatively unexplored topic and as such, this workshop proposes to take concrete situations into account in order to consider the status of historical medical collections and consider them from medical, historical and social science perspectives.

Medical collections and medical museums are places of heritage and preserve human remains as such. However, the notion of heritage, as a common good to be passed on from one generation to the next, can be contemptuous when speaking of human remains, medical or otherwise. Heritage has been criticised for conveying a universalist viewpoint, where in fact human remains are deeply situated objects. This is particularly true of the controversies surrounding restitutions. Archaeology and ethnography have both discussed (and criticised) the circumstances of why, when, how human remains can be collected, preserved and displayed. These perspectives are notable when evaluating historical collections (especially those containing objects collected over previous decades or centuries). There is a clear contrast between these perspectives and that of the anatomy (or medical) profession for whom human tissues removed from the body are considered similar to raw material or biowaste.

We aim to identify the key issues or challenges in formulating a model to mobilise historical and/or neglected biological sample collections for current (or future) medical research. This might address, for example, why, when, how human remains collected in a medical context can be preserved and used, as well as questions of circumstances of the sample collection and consent (ie for diagnosis or research or post-mortem), or questions of registries, catalogues and patient data (without which contents of the collection are unidentifiable, but herein lies the paradox of currently anonymising biological samples in medical research).

In this workshop, we will bring together different professions, including biomedical researchers to discuss what historical collections can do that contemporary biobanks cannot and social scientists and medical historians to present the stakes of working with historical human remains. We further aim to have presentations of examples of medical collections or biobanks that have gone through the shift from neglected to registered collections or biobanks. These examples will highlight particular issues faced, in terms of legislation, material contexts or restraints, current use and other specificities or challenges.

By historicising collections, this workshop therefore proposes to develop methodological avenues for contextualising, adding value and working with such collections and any collections of human tissues.

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