



HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS IN HOSPITAL LIBRARIES

R HONDA COTSELL and GEMMA SIEMENSMA of Ballarat Health Services tell of the huge – but rewarding – task of maintaining and adding to a collection of historical medical material that includes newspaper clippings, paintings and intriguing old medical equipment.

Ballarat Health Services (BHS) Library established its Digital Repository to contain two collections – to record and contain (where copyright permitted) the research output of BHS staff and to deal with the large amount of unorganised historical material that the library had acquired in a very ad hoc fashion. Piles of ‘historical stuff’ has been dumped in the library, mainly because people didn’t want to throw out anything that might be of historical value. There was no established hospital-wide archival collection activity being carried out at BHS.

A functioning historical archive has already added significant value to the library’s role at BHS. Library staff are often approached with questions about the medical history of Ballarat. Information is sought by a wide range of people, including the media, current and previous staff, historians, and families and friends of people who have worked or been patients here.

An example of how this works in both respects is a research article that had been published in 1875 – an important historical piece of medical discovery. A retired doctor drew our attention to the existence of an article written sometime ‘last century’ which told of the first caesarean section performed in Australia. It had been carried out in Ballarat after a mistaken diagnosis of ‘ovarian dropsy’. A search located the article in an 1875 issue of the *Australian Medical Journal*; it is now included in our collection.

Maintaining the repository has meant a significant increase in the workload of a small staff. Assorted boxes and shelves of material already held are currently inaccessible unless someone knows what is there and roughly where it is – obviously not an efficient solution.

The work is shared between the Library Manager and one part-time staff member, who both have other responsibilities that are more pressing than the repository. The historical archive requires dealing with what we have, locating known older material and identifying, monitoring and adding new internal BHS publications to the repository for future reference.

The corporate knowledge of library staff is important for an awareness of the existence of older publications, historical material and what is missing. Old films from various departments were recently collected and those regarded as suitable for inclusion in the repository are being digitised.

An interesting part of the exercise has been looking to the local community and identifying possible sources of historical material e.g. Sovereign Hill, the Mechanics Institute, Public Library Australiana Collection and the Public Records Office of Victoria. The local newspaper has also published an article about the repository with a request for historical BHS-related material. This has opened up ongoing partnerships with other local community groups.

BHS staff have welcomed the initiative with overwhelming enthusiasm, volunteering material they hold and responding positively to requests for historical material as we become aware of them.

You can access this collection at bit.ly/1U7J5dw or via Google and Trove. We are getting hits from all over the world and are encouraged by high usage stats for such a small collection.

What still needs to be done?

So far the historical archive component of the repository is limited to digitised text. There are also boxes of photographs just waiting to be processed – folders and archive-quality

plastic sleeves have been purchased but not yet utilised. There is also a seemingly endless number of prints and paintings, newsletters and newspaper clippings and various historical items displayed around the hospital (in cabinets, on walls, rolls of honour and so on). The local Trained Nurses League has an impressive collection of historical equipment along with photographs and other materials – thousands of items remain to be catalogued and included in the repository.

We want the material to be available for users and believe it is better to start with what we already have, but we also want a professional, perfect system with time to work on the overall concept rather than item by item. We hope to devote more time to it but competing clinical demands makes this difficult.

It is also exciting to see other hospitals starting to document their historical collections with dual research and historical repositories. These include Central Coast Local Health District, Epworth and Barwon Health. We would like many more to follow suit and open up their hidden collections to the world!

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