

**Supplementary
Submission
No 133a**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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Health & Medicine Museums and Collections in NSW

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Introduction

In this submission I will briefly

- draw attention to the vast wealth of health and medicine museums and collections in NSW,
- provide an overview of the location of these collections and the sort of resources allocated (or not allocated) for their maintenance,
- comment on their accessibility (or lack of it) to the public,
- note their potential value to the cultural and historical sensibility of the state and to the wellbeing of its citizens,
- draw attention to the uncertain future of some of these museums,
- offer a possible solution that could save some of the precarious medical collections, exploit their potential as a valuable resource for the public, and address the vexed question of what to do about providing a major museum in Western Sydney.

I write as a former curator of health and medicine at the Powerhouse Museum; a former long-time executive member of the Health and Medicine Museums Special Interest Group; a practising consultant to museums and archives; and a current Adjunct Fellow with the Urban Research Program at Western Sydney University.

This is the first of two submissions I have written to the Inquiry. The second submission deals directly with the proposed removal of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. The two submissions each propose a different way of dealing with need for a major museum in Western Sydney.

Breadth of the distributed health and medicine collection

'Health and medicine collections' is a broad term that covers a range of material held by organisations all of which have in common the aim of preserving the material heritage of some aspect of health care. In New South Wales the parent bodies and funding sources of

these collections vary greatly, from large state museums to historical societies; from hospitals to professional medical organisations; from educational institutions to commercial and not-for-profit businesses.

The range of material in these collections is astonishing and a brief list cannot do it justice. It includes, for example, medical and surgical instruments from as far back as those belonging to 19th colonial doctors; state-of-the-art medical technologies and their prototypes, developed in NSW; hospital and nursing paraphernalia; photographs dating back to the 19th century; material ancillary to health care, such as farming tools formerly used by patients in psychiatric asylums; military medical and nursing equipment; home remedies and quack therapeutic devices; dental, pharmaceutical and other paramedical collections; public health educational and instructive material; ,material associated with Indigenous health programs; and pathology collections of bottled human body parts.

Health and medicine material contained within wider museum collections

There are some 80 health and medicine collections in NSW. Of these, roughly one third contain health and medical material within a wider collection. For example, by far the largest and most wide-ranging health and medicine collection is held by the Powerhouse Museum (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences).[1,2]

The Powerhouse collection is international and ranges across a disparate array of topics. There are unique collections of birth control and menstrual paraphernalia; X-ray and other medical imaging equipment too large to be preserved by other museums; award-winning recent technologies; a complete dental surgery and much, much more.[3] However, the Powerhouse has been subject to budgetary constrictions for many years and forced downsizing of its staff. It has not had a dedicated health and medicine curator since 2008 and is adding little to the collection. A current exhibition 'Recollect: Health and Medicine' is basically just open storage for hundreds of small objects. Although visually stunning in tall glass cases, the exhibition has no interpretation and is of little if any educational value.[4]

Other major museums with health and medical items within their wider collections include Sydney Living Museums and Newcastle Museum (funded by the City of Newcastle). Although fully staffed, again these museums do not have dedicated health/medicine curators or educators.

Then there are regional museums whose wider historical collections contain some health or medical material, often belonging to a former medical or dental practitioner or chemist, or salvaged from the local hospital before it closed. Again, the range of material in these collections is broad, including foot, horse and motor ambulances, iron lungs (used by polio

patients), and mobile baby clinics as well as smaller items of medical equipment. Often there is a focus on prominent former citizens including, for example, wartime nurses.

While some of these regional museums are managed by paid staff, many are managed in part or wholly by local volunteers, as no doubt other submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry will point out. In these circumstances, many struggle to cope financially, maintain professional collection management standards, and mount attractive displays that are of interest and value to local people, students and tourists.

Dedicated health and medicine collections

The remaining health and medicine collections in NSW are dedicated wholly to specific health and medicine topics. For example, they may showcase the development of a particular medical specialty, university department, or health-related organisation. Many are associated with particular hospitals or former hospitals. Of these hospital collections, about half consist simply of a small number of heritage items, including uniforms, equipment, plaques and pictures, which may be on display in hospital foyers or corridor showcases, or which may not be on display at all. I will return to a discussion of these smaller, often unseen collections later.

Other than the small hospital collections that are not necessarily on display, there are about 25 dedicated health and medicine collections in NSW that are held in museums of varying accessibility. Some of them can be considered secure for the time being at least, but some are in a very precarious situation indeed, mainly because of lack of support from the management of their parent bodies, threats to the buildings in which they are housed, insufficient resources, lack of professional museum input, and/or dwindling volunteer numbers.

Those that can be considered 'safe' include museums associated with medical colleges and societies, such as the Australian Society of Anaesthetists and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists. They only remain 'safe', however, as long as the boards of these bodies support their continuing existence, and this is not necessarily guaranteed. These few museums have full or part-time professional curators but there is limited accessibility for the public.

Also, there are pathology and anatomy museums in some university medical faculties. Most of these are only available as teaching and reference resources for the university's own use, but the Pathology Collection at the University of NSW was reinvented some years ago as The Museum of Human Disease with full-time professional staff who run a very successful calendar of public programs for school students and the general public.[5]

On the other hand, the museums most in danger of being lost from sight or closing altogether are those associated with NSW Health. For example, the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Museum and Archives, founded many years ago by the graduate nurses association of that hospital, has an impressive collection located in one of the hospital buildings. In recent times it had a part-time professional curator who, assisted by volunteers, ran a weekly program of open days and mounted regular temporary exhibitions on specific themes in the hospital's main foyer. However the curator resigned last year and has not been replaced, and just two volunteers struggle to keep the museum running.[6]

Brislington Medical and Nursing Museum has been under threat for a number of years. Run by volunteers from the former Parramatta Hospital Graduate Nurses Association, the museum is housed in a heritage building – owned by NSW Health – that now finds itself surrounded by the law precinct in the centre of Parramatta. Because of this there are ongoing negotiations over which government department should have management of the building and what the future use of that building should be. The uses under discussion do not necessarily include housing the Medical and Nursing Museum.[7]

The Society for the Preservation of Artefacts of Surgery and Medicine (SPASM) has a volunteer-run museum in cottages on the grounds of the former Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital. Like a number of other volunteer-run hospital and medical museums, it is open only intermittently to the public – in this case twice a month – and is also available by appointment for groups such as Probus and Rotary Clubs.[8] However, several of its founding members have died in recent years and its aging committee members are being forced to consider what should happen to the collection in the future.

Cumberland Hospital Museum at Westmead has a wonderful collection of material associated with that psychiatric hospital, but since the resignation of a member of the nursing staff who ran the museum as honorary curator, the collection and the displays remain in limbo and the museum is closed to the public except by appointment.[9]

Kenmore Hospital Museum at Goulburn has already disappeared. Run by a group of volunteer hospital staff, this museum used its vast collection to mount annual exhibitions that were often related to this psychiatric institution's role as a self-sufficient village in former times. These exhibitions were particularly valued by former patients and their relatives. However, when the site was sold to a developer several years ago, no provision was made for the ongoing existence of the museum and the collection has been either disbursed or abandoned.[10]

The list of threatened, overlooked, understaffed or underutilised, volunteer-managed museums goes on – Royal North Shore Hospital Centenary Museum, Concord Repatriation

and General Hospital Ethel Lane Nurses' Museum, Nepean Hospital Archives, the Bloomfield Hospital Collection at Orange.

Even those museums that appear to be doing reasonably well at present – the Lucy Osburn-Nightingale Foundation Museum at Sydney Hospital, for example, the Prince Henry Hospital Nursing and Medical Museum at Little Bay, and the Carcoar Hospital Museum in central western NSW – only survive while the health and enthusiasm of their volunteer staff holds out. Their material is not well enough managed to ensure its long-term preservation; their displays attract only a limited number of visitors, often because of the infrequency of their opening hours; and there is no guarantee of their continuing existence beyond the life of their current volunteer committees.

The founders of the SPASM museum at Gladesville (mentioned above) always aimed for their collection to form the basis of a museum owned and run by NSW Health. SPASM President, the late Mrs Judith Cornell AM, was very successful in persuading NSW Health to formulate a policy on the recording and preservation of movable heritage within its various facilities.[11] Mrs Cornell was the principal author of the policy and it was she who wrote a follow-up report on the implementation of the policy. It is because of that report that we know about the smaller, often unseen heritage collections in NSW Health hospitals and other facilities across the state.[1]

The idea of a NSW Health museum was that it would house a collection of its own and would salvage significant items from collections and museums that were closing down. It would also act as a guardian for heritage items that remained within the hospitals and health facilities where they belonged. The museum would preserve the history of health in NSW and would also mount exhibitions and public programs that promoted health and wellbeing. However, such a museum has never eventuated.

Access to health and medicine museums and their collections

In NSW access to health and medicine collections, and to programs and exhibitions informed by those collections, is limited. For example, although the collection at the Powerhouse is digitised and available on-line, it is ten years since there was an exhibition devoted to a health or medical topic, not counting the current 'display storage' exhibition 'Recollections' (mentioned above).[12] Among other major museums in Sydney, 'Drugs: a social history', developed by the Justice and Police Museum in 2004, was the last.[13]

Smaller museums, managed in part or solely by volunteers, are at best open once a week. Although some of them mount small temporary exhibitions on specific topics, generally they have static permanent displays which do not encourage repeat visits; waste opportunities

for interpretation relating to, for example, current health issues; and are not tailored to fit in with the curriculum requirements of school or tertiary student groups.

These smaller museums are not insular, however, and sometimes lend their objects to other projects. In fact, hiring out objects that lend authenticity to movie and television productions – such as 'Underbelly: Razor' and 'ANZAC girls' – is the way some of them supplement their meagre incomes. Their incomes, incidentally, are mainly made up of membership subscriptions, 'gold coin' donations from museum visitors, and small grants for specified projects. But in general they occupy premises that are provided for peppercorn rents or no rent at all.

In addition, when I conducted a survey of some of these museums, I found that they often lent to larger museums. As one volunteer said to me, 'We accumulate what the larger museums only later find valuable'.^[14] Recent examples of such lending include Nancy Bird Walton material from the Royal Far West collection at Manly lent to an exhibition on pioneers at the Australian Museum, and a loan of surgical instruments by SPASM to a major World War 1 exhibition at Melbourne Museum.^[15,16,17]

SPASM is one of the few smaller health and medicine museums that have attempted to make their collections available on-line.^[18] Such projects depend entirely on the commitment and skills of volunteer curators.

The value and significance of health and medicine collections

All museums have the potential to affect their audiences in many ways, and health and medicine museums are no exception. Far from housing esoteric collections of interest only to a fanatical few, health and medicine museums have the potential connect with the life of every single person.

A well-managed health and medicine museum with adequate staffing and resources and an imaginative, informed and professionally presented program of exhibitions, public programs and on-line projects can:

- Arouse wonder, curiosity, reflection, revulsion and aesthetic appreciation.
- Inspire creativity amongst artists, designers and researchers.
- Preserve the relevant history of a state/nation that is justifiably proud of the health of its people.
- Resonate with visitor's experiences of life's major events and milestones – birth, puberty, child-rearing, illness, accident, aging and death.
- Shed light on recent advances in medical technology.
- Explain the background to new health threats, such as lifestyle choices or epidemic diseases.

- Provide opportunities for learning how to look after one's health and wellbeing.
- Showcase career opportunities in, for example, science and technology.
- Allow visitors to understand convergences and divergences in healthcare between different sections of the community in our diverse population.
- Offer a safe place for tackling difficult questions about our way of living.
- Address questions about the future management of our environment.
- Mount integrated exhibitions and programs that do not exclusively concentrate on matters of health and medicine, but which utilize the collection in a broader context.
- Act as a hub for activities and events.
- Cater to a wide range of visitors including local people, tourists, special interest groups, and students from primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.

For too long health and medicine collections have been neglected as a cultural resource. I will give just three examples of the way in which such collections can contribute to the cultural life and wellbeing of a community.

The Museum of Human Disease at the University of NSW is an excellent example of the way in which an obscure collection (in this case a pathology collection) can be revitalized to underpin exhibitions and programs that highlight health issues and attract a wide visitorship.[5,19]

Health and Arts Research Centre (HARC) is a not for profit organisation whose purpose is to advance the synergy between arts, culture and wellbeing. Some of the projects it has undertaken in recent years are an indicator of what can be achieved with health and medicine collections.[20] For example, a recent project saw a collaboration between the special TAFE school Bradfield Senior College, Royal North Shore Hospital and the Royal North Shore Hospital Centenary Museum. The resulting artworks produced by students were not only impressive but were a source of pride in achievement for both students and teachers.

The Wellcome Collection in London is model for what can be accomplished with a medical collection. Looking at its current website I see that it has several exhibitions, including one about understandings of consciousness and another that explores ideas around mental illness. For a month its café and reading room will become a public meeting place for people who hear voices and have other unusual perceptions. As well, it offers museum tours for visitors to London and shows videos about curiosities from collection. Its website presents a mix of videos, images and articles exploring what it means to be human.[21]

Proposal for a major new museum

A number of factors have encouraged me to conclude this submission with an idea that has arisen from discussions with my academic and museum colleagues:

- The controversy over the proposed removal of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta.
- The perception, which appears to be widely agreed upon, that there should be a major museum in Western Sydney.
- The dire circumstances of a number of volunteer-managed health and medicine collections and the proximity and particular relevance of some of these to Parramatta.
- The existence of other types of collection in the vicinity of Parramatta which do not have adequate facilities to preserve and display them, but which are known to staff of the Parramatta Heritage Centre.[22]
- The hitherto overlooked value of a health and medicine museums as a cultural resource.

Consequently, I propose that the development of a major health and medicine museum in Parramatta should be given serious consideration. Such a museum might be a distinct entity or it might be a branch of the Powerhouse Museum that could readily draw on that museum's collections and even house the Powerhouse health and medicine collection in its entirety.

I cannot speak on behalf of the custodians of small health and medicine museums and collections but I know there would be some who would not want their collection taken away from the hospital or institution that it is associated with. On the other hand, I also know that there would be others relieved to know that the collections they had worked so hard to rescue and preserve would be deposited in a safe, permanent home in a Parramatta museum.

Of course, given the sort of wide-ranging programs that such a museum could offer, it would be given a more appropriate name, such as *The Museum of Human Life* or *The Life and Living Hub*. The museum would be unique. There is no other museum or learning centre like it in Australia.

Parramatta used to be known as the City of Asylums and this historical background is evident in the heritage precincts around the city – the Parramatta Female Factory and the Lunatic Asylum, Cumberland Hospital including 'Glengarriff', the Female Orphan School, the doctor's residence Brislington. The area was also an important life-supporting locality for its former Indigenous inhabitants, the name 'Parramatta' being based on a Dharug word meaning 'place of eels'. And finally, there is abundant expertise to tap into at nearby important medical facilities, such as Westmead Hospital, the Children's Hospital Westmead, and the University of Sydney research institutes connected with those hospitals.

For all these reasons it is entirely appropriate that Parramatta should have its own, unique Museum of Human Life.

Megan Hicks PhD

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