

Preserving the History of



Medicine

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Each crack and crease in the old leather saddle bag bears witness to nighttime journeys, its owner having slung it over his horse as he raced to the aid of a patient soaking in a feverish sweat or giving birth in a frontier home. Today, the red Oklahoma prairie dirt has been dusted off, and the story of the

A new generation of medical students finds a window to the past and lessons for the present in a fascinating HSC library collection.

bag and the rider is being told to a new generation of medical students at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

Nearly a century old, the saddlebag still holds the amber glass vials once filled with medicines used to treat those who lived in the Oklahoma territory. Its owner, Dr. LeRoy Long, dean of



the OU School of Medicine from 1915 to 1932, used the saddlebag in the early 1900s to make house calls.

The worn bag and those of other doctors have been unearthed from storage and now are displayed on polished tables as part of the new History of Medicine Collection in the Robert M. Bird Health Sciences Center Library on OU's Oklahoma City campus.

Thanks to a grant from the Presbyterian Health Foundation, medical artifacts and precious historic books are showcased on the fourth floor of the library. Nearby overstuffed chairs and couches invite faculty and students to curl up next to reading lamps as they use the collection to study the origins of diseases.

"All knowledge is built on the past," says Library Director Marty Thompson. "Everything we do is a result of what has happened in the past."

Shelves filled with rare books, medical instruments, microscopes and photographs provide a glimpse into a different place, a different time—such as the black-and-white picture of an anatomy class being held outside in a time before ventilation systems. Thompson believes that maintaining a collection of this type is an important mission for a health sciences university. Establishing a home for the collection has taken many years and help from a number of people. In the past lack of storage space forced the library to turn down some valuable additions; now there is ample room to grow.

HSC librarians regularly update the displays that chronicle medicine's past and its journey through time. One display shows the evolution of needles, documenting the materials from which they were made and the various sizes and shapes used for different purposes. Another

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can be a path to finding the treatments of tomorrow. "This is a place where people can use the knowledge of the past, from the treatment of patients to the drugs that were used," Thompson says. Diseases can change over the years, and students and even faculty may find it necessary to research how the original disease looked, the problems it caused and the treatments prescribed.

"The end result is scholarly action," says Joseph J. Ferretti, senior vice president and provost of the OU Health Sciences Center. "It's a very powerful tool for faculty and students. In this time of information technology, these resources are not on the Internet."

For example, the last known case of smallpox in the United States was in 1949, according to the Centers for Disease Control, but the threat of bioterrorism has put the disease back in the forefront of research and study. HSC librarians are responding with a planned display in the collection tracing the history of the disease.

Books in the History of Medicine Collection cover a range of medical topics. The oldest book, published in 1548, details the science of medicine at the time. The oldest herbal book, printed in 1828, contains beautiful illustrations of plants and flowers used in medicines.

Older books are bound in boxes that act as "knee braces," as Thompson likes to refer to them, to keep the

bindings tight and the pages shaded from ultraviolet light. The boxes also help keep the moisture and humidity at a consistent level, which helps prevent acid from the paper and ink from devouring the pages. He says some books and materials are being digitized because they cannot be preserved in their original state.



HSC Library Director Marty Thompson stands beside a turn-of-the-20th century exam chair from the office of Dr. Guy W. Taylor, an El Reno physician who is shown in the photo on the wall standing next to the chair in 1897.

exhibit showcases posters sent to doctors from tobacco companies listing various ailments the companies claimed could be cured by tobacco.

The collection is not just a place that emphasizes how far medicine has advanced. Rare books resting on the dark wood shelves take readers back to the first discoveries of diseases—and looking back



While research is the main focal point of the collection, the tools of the trade of past physicians provide the human side of the evolution of health care. The Dr. Lewis Moorman Collection, for example, contains business ledgers that detail the costs of treatment. Moorman, who was dean of the School of Medicine from 1933 to 1935, kept medical records as well as letters to patients, family and business associates.

“It’s bits and pieces that give us a glimpse of what was happening at the time,” Thompson says. “It’s rebuilding an era of time.”

Newspaper articles identify Dr. Charles Bobo, the first dean of the OU School of Medicine in 1910, as the first physician in Norman, while letters written on onionskin paper record correspondence between Dr. Long and his colleagues and patients during the early 1900s.

“Not only is this a history of medicine, but it’s a history of medicine in Oklahoma,” says Dr. Roy Barton Carl, a Presbyterian Health Foundation board member

and retired Oklahoma City physician.

Carl’s interest in the history of medicine began when he was a student in the OU College of Medicine’s Class of 1955. A history of medicine course was offered to medical students who met at 4 p.m. on Tuesdays, Carl remembers. Three or four students also gathered as a club to discuss the history of health care.

“There might have been 20 students if we would have had a place like this,” Carl says.

While the History of Medicine Collection looks to the past, it also will hold onto things of the present as narratives and other articles are added to its resources. The library continues to accept contributions from families seeking a home for memorabilia that once had a place in a loved one’s medical practice. The library staff also searches for other books and materials that will make a difference in the collection.

Thompson contends that it does not matter what journey the items take as long as their stories can be told again.



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