

The triple helix in action in the Medical History Museum

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In the early months of 1971, 176 pallets of late Regency cabinetry—comprising the shop fittings of a London branch of the Savory & Moore firm of chemists and druggists—arrived at the University of Melbourne’s Medical History Museum. How and why this small 19th century pharmacy found its way across the globe to be installed in the Museum, have been questions frequently asked by visitors, now answered by a DVD presentation, part of a multimedia production on view in the Museum, and the subject matter of this article.

The story begins in 1967 with the establishment by Professor Ken Russell of the University’s Medical History Unit, then comprising the Museum and its collection, and a Medical Rare Books Collection and reading room. This initiative was generously funded by the Wellcome Trust, the London-based institution dedicated to the promotion and development of the history of medicine worldwide. Professor Russell was known to the Trust through his visits to the Wellcome Library, where he had researched and in due course produced a number of publications. When therefore in 1970 it became known that the Trust had rescued a recently closed down pharmacy, removed from its premises



at 29 Chapel Street, Belgravia, and that as custodian it was offering the internal fittings of the pharmacy to an institution that taught the history of medicine, Professor Russell quickly registered his interest. After a considerable volume of correspondence between the University and the Trust, Her Majesty’s Customs, and insurance and forwarding agents in late 1970–1971, the little pharmacy finally made its way in a shipping container to the port of Melbourne, the voyage generously funded

again by the Wellcome Trust.

Guided only by a simple plan of the internal fittings and just seven black and white photographs of the pharmacy in its original setting, the University architect and carpenters succeeded in reinstalling the shop almost exactly as it had appeared in London. A series of photographs, now part of the Museum’s archives, recorded this interesting installation process. The cost of the final leg of the pharmacy’s journey to the University, and its installation in the



Opposite: Installation of the Savory & Moore pharmacy display in 1971. Black and white photographic print. Photographer unknown. Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.

Left: Pharmacist Alec Millar being filmed pouring his preparation into a suppository mould in the Savory & Moore pharmacy, December 2007. Photography by Jessie Borrelle.

Museum, was met by an anonymous private benefactor, recently made known to us as Mr Geoff Donaldson AO. Now, almost 40 years later, Mr Donaldson has again demonstrated his support of this pharmacy and the Museum, by meeting the considerable cost of making our DVD.

Although the pharmacy had always generated much interest—and a degree of surprise—when visitors first came upon it in the Museum, it seemed that after this initial impression the pharmacy did not readily divulge any further of its secrets. Unless within the context of a guided tour that might explain its workings more fully, it stood as a rather static display, at risk of being seen as just a rather quaint relic of the past. Little new research had been carried out, nor further material added to its files since the 1970s, and it seemed that the pharmacy was not fulfilling its considerable potential as an authentic 19th century setting through which not only the history of pharmacy might be told, but also a broader, more social history of medicine concerning the human experience of sickness and the restoration of health.

To deal with the under-utilisation of such a significant part of the collection, it was felt that new ways needed to be found to invigorate and

interpret the pharmacy, and that this might be achieved in a project that would actively engage both its public and student visitors in a process of knowledge transfer, a prime activity and educational goal identified by the University as part of the triple helix of the new Melbourne Model.

Although recently given new emphasis by the University, the Medical History Museum has in fact always practised knowledge transfer. As part of its public programs, the Museum had provided guided tours of the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions for many groups in the wider community, providing an opportunity for the two-way exchange of ideas and experiences. These have recently included such groups as the Medical History Society of Victoria; members of the Friends of the Baillieu Library, Probus clubs and the University of the Third Age; museum donors and supporters; visitors during Senior Citizens Week, University Open Day and Orientation Week; prospective and overseas students and their parents; secondary school groups; and students of nursing, medical technology, pharmacy and the like from other universities and colleges.¹

The Museum's collection has also had a long association with teaching and learning (a second strand of the

triple helix). In common with a number of the University's cultural collections (particularly within the areas of medicine and the life sciences), artefacts were first acquired to facilitate learning, and were used directly in the teaching of the curricula. The reference collections of slides and specimens, the models and charts, and other items of equipment were used as teaching aids by the early professors in their various disciplines. Where these items have survived, they form the core of these collections, and as such, preserve the history of their various schools and faculties.² In the instance of the Medical History Museum, many of its artefacts originally used for teaching purposes: the lecture and clinical notes, microscopes and slide specimens, X-rays, photographs and diagnostic instruments, for example, are once again coming under academic scrutiny. In student tutorials conducted in the Museum new questions are put to this historical material that can shed light on current medical—and museological—concerns. In these course tutorials, scholarly attention focuses on the artefacts themselves, and the Museum is keen for these sessions to expand under the new University curriculum, with artefacts actually drawing forth the ideas rather than merely

Film crew with pharmacist Neil Hookey preparing pills in the Savory and Moore Pharmacy, December 2007. Photography by Gillian McTigue.



illustrating given facts in a prescribed text.³ The Savory & Moore interpretive video was conceived with the firm belief in the value of objects as conveyors of ideas.

In the course of thinking through the Museum's challenge of how to present a more thoughtful and engaging interpretation of the Savory & Moore pharmacy, it became clear that this was part of a larger need for the Museum to find new ways of operating (within its limited means), if it were to remain relevant into the future, and be an active participant in the new model of teaching and learning under way at the University. This concern, of continuing relevance in a rapidly changing, future-focussed world, is a concern shared by most historical museums today, but brought to the fore in the particular circumstances under which museums in universities operate.

Whilst the primary concern of museums (within and outside universities) is with authentic artefacts and their capacity to communicate ideas, university museums operate within a particular environment which has privileged the didactic, academic activity, with its reliance on the text as the principal conveyor of ideas, over a more interpretive, visual and cultural approach to a subject. This has led to

a tendency within universities to see their historical collections and museums more as an adjunct to the main business of the institution, rather than recognising in them a valuable, existing asset that could be playing a vital, new and highly attractive role in the academic program.

There have been some encouraging signs that boundaries between academic disciplines are becoming less rigid, and at this University there is some awareness that teaching support from museums can provide fresh ways of engaging the minds of students, of stimulating the imagination and encouraging individual thinking.⁴ However, insufficient funding for university museums has long been the norm and will probably remain so, in the sciences at least, where 'real research' is generally seen as something that occurs in a laboratory, producing precise and calculated results, rather than the 'softer' and less precise findings more common to the humanities when dealing historically with experience. Whilst the Medical History Museum has received grants from the University's Annual Appeal, Cultural and Community Relations Advisory Group, Cultural Collections Committee, and various philanthropic trusts, it is always a challenge to find

sufficient resources to operate more effectively. This is particularly true for the development of new, explorative ways to interpret the collections, and to set up the collaborations that might provide the opportunity for the Museum to show its potential.

Serendipitous therefore it was, in April 2007, after several unsuccessful attempts to attract funding for a proposed multimedia project on the history and dispensing practices of the Savory & Moore pharmacy, to receive the telephone call of Geoff Donaldson. Coming quite out of the blue, the concerned caller, not previously known to the Museum, was inquiring after the present circumstances of the pharmacy. In the course of what turned out to be a lengthy conversation, reassuring the caller about the pharmacy's wellbeing and the popular part it continued to play in the life of the Museum, the proposed project for a more active role for the pharmacy in the communication of ideas was raised. By the end of our conversation, I had discovered not only the identity of the pharmacy's original Melbourne benefactor, but also, that we had been offered the means with which to proceed with our production, a generous gift that proved to be the full amount needed to cover the total cost of the project.

Pharmacy jars, glass, Great Britain, c.1870s,
left to right: *Troch: Lavand*; *Cupr: Acet* and
Tr: Capsici, height: 24.0 cm, 8.75 cm and 19.0 cm.
Originally from Palmer's Pharmacy in Ballarat.
Reg. nos. MHM 1149.7, MHM 1152.27 and
MHM 1152.39, Medical History Museum,
University of Melbourne.
Photography by Jessie Borrelle.

Amongst those attending tours conducted in 2007 as part of the Museum's public programs was what proved to be a significant group—five old friends who had come particularly to visit the Savory & Moore pharmacy, and to recall their experiences in the familiar atmosphere of a pharmacy similar to those in which they had spent their working lives. These men (Bryan Casey, Brian Cossar, Neil Hookey, Alec Millar and John Grogan) were all retired retail pharmacists who had served apprenticeships, and attended lectures at the Melbourne Pharmacy College in the late 1940s and 1950s, where they were introduced to 'the art and mystery of pharmacy'.⁵ These men were among the last generation of students who had learned extensively the mixing by hand of prescriptions and other medications, a practice no longer necessary in modern pharmaceutical practice. This highly skilled and detailed training was largely dropped from the pharmacy curriculum by the late 1970s, as it had been from the medical course about a decade earlier. These five men were amongst the last practitioners of skills that had been developed and practised since the earliest recorded accounts of medicine, and no doubt earlier by others who had crushed and pounded



their herbs with simpler tools and understanding. Listening to their sharp and lively recollections of memorable experiences, both as student-apprentices and as practitioners, I realised that here, through them, might lie an opportunity for the making of a recording in video and sound that would preserve the details of their working lives, and the practices that would eventually be lost with the passing of this generation. Such a recording might also provide the material and opportunity for a multimedia production, with modules focussing on a more social and experiential history of pharmacy, available for an extended range of visitors to the Savory & Moore pharmacy in person, and to the Medical History Museum website.⁶

The matter was raised with the pharmacists who responded enthusiastically to the suggestion that they participate in a video recording, each preparing a prescription using the pharmacy equipment, and carrying out this activity at the Savory & Moore preparator's bench.

Meanwhile, a team was drawn together from the University's Biomedical Multimedia Unit and the Digital Media Services in the Information and Educational Services Program. A series of meetings took

place over several months, and a timeline was drawn up, whilst the scripts were researched and written. A number of these meetings included input from our would-be actors, now fully engaged and keen as the project took shape, and were conducted over some pleasant morning teas. At this stage too, copyright clearance, reproduction rights, and permissions and releases to play the video modules, both in the Museum and on the internet via the Museum's website, were discussed with all parties and providers involved, including the University's Copyright Office.

The making of the video clips was to be commenced first, so these actions were pinned down with the assistance of the pharmacists, who had decided themselves who would be responsible for preparing the ointment, the pills, the mixture and the suppositories we had decided upon for filming. This was printed out for our actors as a series of scripted actions for them to perform, and the equipment, ingredients and other props that would be required were listed for them to check. A location test for lighting, sound recording, camera positioning, etc., was carried out, and a rehearsal held with the pharmacists, in preparation for the shoot which would take place

in the pharmacy the following week. This important day took place in December 2007.

During this filming session an audio recording was made, capturing such background sounds as the grinding of pestle on mortar and the slap of spatula on marble slab. To this sound recording a voice-over was later added, of each pharmacist explaining the steps involved in the mixing of his prescription. This was recorded in February 2008 in the University's Horwood Language Centre, followed by another session with all the pharmacists together, engaged in an informal exchange of unscripted background conversation. To complete, and to add further dimensions to the soundtrack, passages of music performed by a piano trio would be recorded and added to the video. A recording of the voice of a professional actor would also be added later when all four modules were completed, to provide continuity.

The pharmacists having completed their part, the second module was then commenced, comprising the researched story of the pharmacy's arrival, a little of its Savory & Moore history, and a walk-through with voice-over describing the major features encountered. This involved the use of stills of historical photographs as well as new, high

Pharmacy jars, glass, Great Britain, left to right:
Syr: Acid Hydriod; Aqua: Lauro-Cera;
Lin: Chlorof and Acid: Sulphuro,
height: 19.5 cm, 17.2 cm, 25.5 cm and 20.0 cm.
Reg. nos MHM 1294.1, MHM 2500.1,
MHM 1582.7 and MHM 1294.3,
Medical History Museum,
University of Melbourne.
Photography by Jessie Borrelle.
Bottles with corrugated surfaces were an initial
caution to the pharmacist that he was handling a
powerful or dangerous drug.

resolution shots taken behind the counter, of pharmacy storage vessels, equipment and the Savory & Moore window display, with its show globes of coloured waters. A proof of content viewing followed the first editing of the video and sound. From this, a prototype or sampling of these two major modules was finished in time for the launch in the Museum in March 2008 as a component of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Centre for Health and Society. This now plays in the Museum for visitors as an introduction and prelude to visiting the pharmacy itself.

A DVD screen and MiniMac video player were also purchased from our benefactor's funding, and are fixed to the wall in the Museum space. This location for the playing of the programs was selected at a distance from the pharmacy itself as it was felt that it should maintain its own space and integrity, without the intrusion of recent technology. This arrangement means that today, visitors can sit and watch the presentations, and begin to focus their thoughts on what they might encounter, before entering the little shop itself. Perhaps they will experience more vividly and with more insight what it might have been like to visit the pharmacy, perhaps as a patient in need of help, some 50 or more years ago.



Enthusiastic responses from visitors, particularly on special open days and tours, and recorded in the visitors' book, suggest that the efforts of all teams and players involved have not been in vain. Readers are likewise invited to visit the Museum, and judge for themselves whether we have been successful in enlivening the pharmacy, and making it a more engaging and thought-provoking experience—one which along the way reveals a little of the history,

art and mystery of pharmacy.

In conclusion, the decision to produce a video and online multimedia component about the Savory & Moore pharmacy has been one example of the Medical History Museum's response to a number of challenges arising from the University's new course structure under the Melbourne Model, and its emphasis on knowledge transfer. In the process of finding new ways of actively engaging its student and

public bodies, we believe this project gives the visitor a richer, more direct and personal experience. Through the use of fresh approaches and new techniques we hope to draw into the Museum and its Savory & Moore pharmacy new 'customers', with new questions to ask.

The Medical History Museum will be closed for the second half of 2009, due to refurbishment of the Brownless Biomedical Library in which it is located. See page 54 for interim contact details.

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Notes

- 1 In addition to its exhibitions and guided tours, the Museum has engaged its diverse communities in a process of knowledge transfer through the presentation of conference papers, journal and web publications, its photograph reproduction services (largely for family historians and book writers and publishers), and through the many inquiries it handles for the general public and for researchers, both local and overseas.

- 2 This history and the changing role of objects in university science collections can be more fully explored in Steven W.G. de Clercq and Marta C. Lourenço, 'A globe is just another tool: Understanding the role of objects in university collections', *University Museums and Collections*, ICOM Study Series (*Cahiers d'étude*), vol. 11, 2003, pp. 4–6.
- 3 Recently, lecturers and tutors in history, history and philosophy of science, advanced medical science, conservation of cultural materials, and art curatorship have brought their students to the Museum for tutorials, where they have been exposed to this more engaging way of learning. Course exit questionnaires indicate that these sessions are popular with students.
- 4 Consider the formerly distinct disciplines—and genres of writing—in the natural sciences, medicine, literature, history, etc., and now the more popular narrative writing that draws on a

broader base of cross-disciplinary research, making for a richer, more accessible and informative read in the hands of its more skilled exponents. Collection items themselves have also recently become the source and evidence in books such as Philip Jones, *Ochre and rust: Artefacts and encounters on Australian frontiers*, Kent Town, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 2008.

- 5 This phrase appears on the certificate presented since 1841 by the Royal Society of Physicians of Great Britain, which acknowledges not only the recipient's training and eligibility for the privileges of the Society, but also his or her introduction into 'the art and mystery of pharmacy'. It now provides the title of the Museum's DVD production.
- 6 The Museum's website can be found at www.chs.unimelb.edu.au/programs/jnmhu/museum

