

Free for all: Medical history on the Internet

Introduction

An increasing amount of information is now freely available on the internet. The main problem is locating it. This brief guide aims to identify some of the best places to start if you are looking for reliable, accessible history of medicine content on the internet.

What sort of material can I expect to find?

The quality and type of material that is freely available on the internet can vary markedly. It is important to consider the reliability of a resource as well as how regularly it is maintained and updated. Internet resources are regularly reviewed and URLs change, so any resource that provides links to other sites needs to be monitored. The following broad headings give a general overview of the type of resources you can expect to find.

Bibliographies / finding aids

Bibliographies can come in many forms, ranging from single page compilations on a particular topic to Library or Archive catalogues with advanced search facilities and a variety of browsing options.

Many libraries or archival repositories now provide online catalogues which help users to locate the hard copies of books and archives. An increasing number of catalogues seek to incorporate some form of cross-searching functionality which enables users to simultaneously search a number of resources or to repeat their search. There is an increasing move towards some level of interoperability with electronic resources. A selection of libraries and archival resources which may be of interest to researchers can be found at: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/cgi-bin/browse-keyword.pl?jacs=medhist&id=95439>

Full-text journals

Increasing numbers of journals are now freely available online. Some have restrictions on access and only provide free access to older issues, while others do not have extensive backfiles and are only available to provide access going back a limited number of years.

Full-text books

Out of copyright books are regularly being digitised and made available on the internet. Early versions, such as those provided by Project Gutenberg, were often text only, while more user-friendly digital versions which enable hypertext linking between chapters are now emerging. Sometimes books are simply available as a PDF file while technologies like the Turning the Pages projects at the British Library, the Royal Society and the Wellcome Library provide a more virtual feel.

Online exhibitions

Exhibitions are popular and are often designed to showcase material which is held within a collection. They can be based on a physical exhibition which was on display the original institution and do not require the complete digitisation of a whole book or journal article. Content varies markedly and often reflects the interest area of the curator, a specific area of the collections or notable acquisitions and material such as images, posters or ephemera.

Images / Pictures / Photographs

Photographs, paintings and ephemera are among some of the most eye-catching and easy to digitise items. These are often used in online exhibitions as detailed above, but can also be incorporated into individual catalogues and collections. Some resources are exclusively devoted to making pictorial works freely accessible.

Subject specialisation

The history of medicine is made up of numerous areas of specialisation which have emerged over the previous 4000 years and have developed in different ways across the world. Subject specialisation can accordingly vary markedly, with websites developed by individuals, societies who have a specific



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area of interest, university departments who are researching particular topics and museums whose holdings are strong in specific areas. The history of medicine is more a history of mankind and it is intricately interwoven with the social sciences.

Websites which concentrate on a particular subject can accordingly vary in their approach, content and reliability.

How to find what you are looking for: first steps

National Library of Medicine History of Medicine Division

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/index.html>

The NLM houses the world's largest history of medicine collections. The site includes online catalogues which can be used to identify resources within the printed collections as well as the unpublished materials. Also on offer is online access to almost 60,000 images, an archive of NLM online exhibitions and the world's largest online collection of history of medicine syllabi.

PubMed Central / UK PubMed Central

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov> or <http://www.ukpmc.ac.uk>

PubMed Central is a free digital archive of biomedical and life sciences journal literature.

The full cost of scanning the back issues and creating the OCR and XML files is covered by the NLM, and in some cases, the Wellcome Trust and the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC).

The site offers full-text access to around 1.5 million full-text articles. There are full search facilities, allowing you to search with limits, searching within a journal or a particular time period. A significant number of the journals are relatively recent publications going back to the 1990s, however back digitisation projects are resulting in some significant journals being released including:

- British Medical Journal
- Canadian Medical Association Journal
- Journal of Anatomy
- Journal of Bacteriology
- Medical History
- Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine

Bibliothèque Universitaire de Médecine

<http://www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/histmed>

This site is divided into two main sections: Medicine / odontologie & histoire de la médecine et de l'art dentaire

There is one drawback to this site: it's a French language site and does not offer an English-language interface. However, it does have an Ask The Librarian English option. The site concentrates on French personalities and authors. Some of the sub-sections have English versions, while some full-text works are in English, but on the whole you do need a working knowledge of French to fully exploit the site.

Medic@ offers digitised versions of out of copyright texts including reference works, outbreaks and diseases, history of medicine and medical institutions, medicine in antiquity, medical specialisations and doctors.

There is a searchable database of over 5700 freely accessible digitised versions of works which are available on the Internet, not necessarily BIUM in origin. There is full-text access to a number of electronic journals as well as the satellite sites of a number of partners, including the International Society for the Social History of Medicine and a range of French historical societies covering dermatology, dentistry and hospitals and medical education.

The Banque d'images et portraits is a searchable collection of over 37,000 images, and there is a biographical database of over 18,000 figures.



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Medhist

<http://www.medhist.ac.uk>

Medhist is part of Intute, and is a free online service providing access to high quality, evaluated Web resources for education and research. Subject specialists select and evaluate the websites and informative descriptions of the resources.

Medhist provides a gateway to a wide range of freely accessible resources, including image banks, electronic journals and full text books. The site provides global coverage and holds entries in a number of languages, with all descriptions provided in English.

Resources can be browsed using MeSH headings or subject headings, as well as personal name listings and a general word search option.

From June 2010, MedHist will no longer be updated and its future is in doubt.

Other useful sites

In Our Time

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/>

The history of medicine has never been so popular. Television and radio coverage is at an all-time high, and sites such as the BBC offer access to a range of archived recordings. In Our Time has a huge collection of previously aired programmes covering a wide range of relevant topics (science, religion, philosophy, history and culture). The subject coverage is particularly strong on the history of science, technology and medicine.

Brought to Life

<http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife.aspx>

Launched in 2009, Brought to Life features over 2,500 objects from the Science Museum's medical collections, and covers 3,000 years of medical history. Aimed at a range of audiences, content is arranged around theme and topic, with related links, glossaries and suggested reading.

'Wellcome History of Medicine' Historyworld Timeline

<http://www.historyworld.net/about/wellcome.asp>

Historyworld aims to make history more accessible through interactive narratives and timelines. Although of its time in appearance and style, featured here is a wealth of content on the History of Medicine, often illustrated with items from the Wellcome Library's collections.

Institute for Historical Research: History in Focus: Medical History

<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/index.html>

History in Focus provides original articles, book reviews, and links to historical resources. Provided by the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London the materials have been chosen by their in-house editorial team. There are two issues each year, and the Medicine issue brings together resources for the History of Medicine, from antiquity to the twentieth century. There is a useful set of external web links. The main problem is currency: it's very much a snapshot of the subject at that time, and the issue won't be updated. However, it is very useful!

History of the Health Sciences Section of the Medical Library Association

<http://www.mla-hhss.org/histlink.htm>

This American-based organisation has an extensive web presence, and this website offers access to a huge number of web resources. The one main drawback is that there is no cross-search available, so each resource needs to be investigated separately. The links are grouped into organisations and museums, libraries and archives, important figures, bibliographies, listservs and newsgroups and online journals.



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Wellcome Library

The Wellcome Library and the Wellcome Trust are strong advocates of making information accessible free of charge via the internet.

The Wellcome Library's collections (<http://catalogue.wellcome.ac.uk>) contain over 750,000 books and journals, in excess of 250,000 prints, paintings and drawings and an extensive range of manuscripts, archives and films. The collections can be searched through a selection of online catalogues which are freely available via the internet.

The Archives and Manuscripts (<http://archives.wellcome.ac.uk>) catalogue is freely accessible online and users can search the Library's world renowned collections of unpublished sources.

The Wellcome Images catalogue (<http://images.wellcome.ac.uk>) provides online access to the extensive collections of over 200,000 digital photographs from the historical and biomedical images. The images are freely accessible and downloadable under a Creative Commons license.

The Library provides additional digital access to its treasures through its Turning the Pages volumes (<http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/ttp.html>) and has started to digitise parts of its collections (<http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/node350.html>). Projects of particular note are Wellcome Film (<http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/wellcomefilm.htm>) which provides free access to over 450 titles from our Moving Image and Sound Collection, and the full text digitisation of over 70 English manuscript receipt (recipe) books from the 17th Century.

The Library Blog (<http://wellcomelibrary.blogspot.com>) has proven very popular with our users. It allows us to highlight recently catalogued collections, service developments, Library workshops, research outputs and showcase individual items from our vast collections. The blog can also be followed through posts on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/WellcomeLibrary>

Web 2.0

The growth of web 2.0 applications has led to the creation of a wealth of blogs, podcasts and pages with relevance to the History of Medicine – but how reliable is it?

Morbid Anatomy (<http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.com/>) draws on the intersection of anatomy and art but also lists a huge array of websites, blogs and online exhibitions. For relevant podcasts, iTunesU includes material from Universities (such as UCL (<http://itunes.ucl.ac.uk/>)) and Institutions (such as the Royal Society's talks on the History of Science). Relevant content on the History of Medicine continues to be added to YouTube and Flickr. It won't be too long before this session could consist of purely Web 2.0 material!

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