

UNITE AND CONQUER: WORKING TOWARDS A COLOMBIAN NETWORK OF HEALTH HERITAGE

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The *Red Colombiana de Patrimonio en Salud* (RCPS, Colombian Network of Health Heritage) was established in September 2017 after the celebration of the First National Meeting of History of Medicine Collections and Museums in Colombia. Although the network is young and still in the making, it arises from decades of individual and institutional efforts in collecting and conservation, and two centuries of critical medical work in the country. Its constitution is aimed at increasing the knowledge and value of a heritage which is quantitatively and qualitatively significant, but still largely unknown in the local, national and international context. The Network is currently composed by thirteen collections and museums largely concentrated in Bogotá. It integrates private and public institutions, museums held in working hospitals, professional academies, universities, private homes, and site museums in the premises of two of the three leprosaria established in Colombia during the nineteenth century. The collections contain anatomical preparations, dermatological wax models, experimental physiology apparatus, surgical and obstetrical instruments, cardiological technologies, pharmaceutical ware and chemicals, photographic pathological atlases, wall-charts, wheel chairs, incubators, x-ray machines, orthopedic devices, pneumothorax machines, anesthesia apparatus, medical notebooks, and patient identification cards, among others. A relevant portion of the items preserved were imported from Europe and the USA for use in Colombian hospitals and universities, but there is also a number of objects produced in the country, including some local and national inventions such as the “Pasta Colombia” (for X-ray protection), a Colombian pacemaker (pre-

transistor era), Velasco's spatulae, a sample of "panela" (a type of raw cane sugar) used to cure wounds, or the "Bogotá bag" used to close the abdomen with a costless plastic bag, which are little known in the international medical history literature.

The Network provides an umbrella for a project which includes several related actions. This project has four integrated elements that are fundamental to its development but have also their own dynamics: a semestral introductory history of medicine course, a digital humanities platform (Instituto *Raimundo Russi* de Historia Aplicada de la Ciencia, la Técnica y la Medicina - IRRHACTM), an emerging national network of health collections and museums (RCPS), and an occasional museum & heritage course focused on science, technology and medicine. Bogota's quantitatively and qualitatively significant medical heritage, and its solid (though requiring urgent renovation) tradition in the history of medicine are relevant assets for this project that are however subjected to the epistemological and political pressures of medical education, the commercialization of higher education in Colombia and the standard institutional and economic difficulties for medical heritage.

In 2013, the Universidad del Rosario, where I teach, implemented a reform of its medical program through competencies and learning by clinical cases, which offers a remarkable amount of medical humanities across the curriculum. The medical syllabus includes three core courses in the history, sociology and anthropology of medicine (in the first, fourth, and sixth semesters), and historical and sociological approaches to health among the umbrella of perspectives presented in each clinical case (focusing on body systems and frequent diseases) in the curriculum. In this context, since 2016 I have designed and managed (with collaboration from Paula Ronderos) a new history of medicine course for fourth-semester medical students. Among the course's challenges are traditional obstacles such as persuading medical students of the importance of the humanities for their practice, and making medical history useful to physicians, while teaching them historically-rigorous methods and approaches, notwithstanding the fact that none of them will become professional historians of medicine. In addition, a survey of major introductory books in the history of medicine shows that in spite of the dramatic change of this discipline in the last decades, the major narratives available in medical history textbooks have not changed in accordance for more than half a century. The themes and approaches of works such as Ackerknecht's *A Short History of Medicine* (1955) are still particularly influential in how textbooks are written, with few exceptions, for instance, the remarkable pedagogical efforts of

Jacalyn Duffin (1999), and a recent medical history book edited in the Netherlands by Hillen, Houwart and Huisman (2018).

In this context, during the last two years I have worked with four medical student cohorts in the production of object biographies as part of their history of medicine course. Students have focused on six infectious diseases, and four medical technologies. Their assignment engaged them as researchers in a process of documentation, text and object analysis and interpretation, and historical writing. While they worked originally on generic objects, subsequently the course included a session on museums (as one among other urban spaces where medicine is practiced) and a visit to one of the museums of the Colombian Network of Health Heritage. We also encouraged students to develop observations in the context of their own training practice at the hospital, as yet another source for their writing assignments.

Concomitantly, during the first half of 2018 I taught a museology and heritage course for history students at the same university. In this framework, I started cataloguing the medical collections of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, including items from the national university and from two major hospitals in Bogotá (San Juan de Dios and San Carlos), with the help of two students who also prepared a short biography of two medical objects preserved at the collections' storehouse. These combined efforts are thus aiming at producing a convergence of museological, historical, pedagogical and medical interests by achieving a greater intersection between the classroom and the museum, a greater prominence of past and present objects (non-textual) in teaching and research, and as a result re-imagining the medical history curriculum. Vice versa, the engagement of medical history teaching with museum collections aims at advancing the recovery of the material culture of medicine in Bogotá, the establishment of more professional standardized museum practices, and the strengthening of an emerging national health heritage network.

The development of this project has had another key actor: The Instituto *Raimundo Russi* de Historia Aplicada de la Ciencia, la Técnica y la Medicina (IRRHACTM). The founding in 2016 of the *Raimundo Russi* Institute for Applied History of Science, Technology and Medicine, in Bogotá (as a digital humanities platform) had a key role in the organization, a year later, of the First Medical Heritage Week and the First National Meeting of History of Medicine Collections and Museums in Colombia. Furthermore, the IRRHACTM web acts as a catalyzer for teaching, research, and popularization projects focusing on

scientific, medical and technological heritage. Since 2016, IRRHACTM has curated the publication of almost one hundred biographies of medical objects (on ten items) produced by students. This repertoire offers a growing online encyclopaedia furthering the mission of our global project and feeding back into teaching and learning through medical collections, and research on the material culture of medicine in Colombia.

Thus, this paper puts together the discussion of the standard narratives and big pictures available for the teaching of introductory history of medicine courses, the challenges of introducing the material culture of medicine in the classroom, and the use of digital media for research and pedagogical purposes. Furthermore, I will reflect on the need of getting medical teaching out of the classroom and the academic citadel, into cities such a Bogotá that are especially rich in social, cultural and medical heritage. In this paper, I will provide a big picture of this initiative and provide some illustrative examples to discuss the current state of a project whose horizon is to contribute to the collective transformation of medical history education through the use of museum objects and the conceptualization of the city of Bogotá as a medical history site museum. I will first provide a big picture of the Network and the museums and collections that form it. Second, I will discuss the teaching and research initiatives developed in connection with the Network. Finally, I will share my thoughts as the current coordinator of the Network on the short-term future development of this endeavor. By presenting and reviewing this practical experience, I hope to provide useful insights to other historians and museologists of medicine, and to advance further in the training of future medical doctors as individuals fully conscious of their sociopolitical agency in the making of medical heritage.

REFERENCES

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