

A MEDICAL MUSEUM FOR LANCASTER

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At last, after virtually 40 years of the dream, we have the beginnings of a Lancaster Medical Museum. This is due to the drive and enthusiasm of many people who will be named later and to the support of the Morecambe Bay Hospitals Trust, through its chairman, Idris Williams and its chief executive, Ian Cumming.

But let me begin at the beginning by explaining how I have seen it take shape. I was fortunate to be taken into general practice in 1963 by John Wilkie, after three years as a medical registrar at the RLI. When he retired in 1966 I discovered in the dispensary behind my consulting room an 1830's Laennec-style solid wooden stethoscope, as well as a baby's smallpox vaccination shield, a pelvimeter and a catgut glass tube breaker. I was intrigued by them and put them aside, thinking they might be worth displaying some time. I showed them to colleagues and friends who took an interest and who gave me or guided me to a few more redundant items of medical interest.

Soon after this I took a three-week holiday in Norway and Sweden with my wife. In a small town in north Sweden we chanced on a GP's house on the main street. He had built onto his house a large room in which he housed a museum of medical memorabilia and Lapland silver. To see this collection one was invited in for a small fee. We were enchanted by all we saw and from that moment on I was resolved to start something similar in Lancaster.

The dream was now born for me and I made it my business to collect actively. I visited antique shops, junk shops and car boot sales etc and the collection grew, so that I began displaying them in the cellars of my house. Of course at that stage I could only show the meagre collection to colleagues and friends. Almost all of them were enthusiastic and gave me more and more items. I remember in particular Geoffrey Barrett (consultant physician) donating his early ECG machine and Justin Kelly (consultant surgeon) told me how he had asked his theatre sister not to throw out old, redundant instruments in case a use could be found for them in the future. When he saw my collection he directed me to gather them from theatre. I did so.

Dr A J Stout of Dalton Square took me into his cellars and pointed out various ancient items which lay there covered in coal dust and cobwebs, and had been there since before his time! He was in practice there for about 60 years. These also joined the collection.

After a few years I became aware that John Dyer (community physician) was also collecting similar material with an emphasis on community health records. We agreed that somehow we should try to put our collections together, ultimately aiming to make them viewable by the general public.

Valerie Anderson, who was responsible for investigative cardiology at RLI, was at this time working with some of the

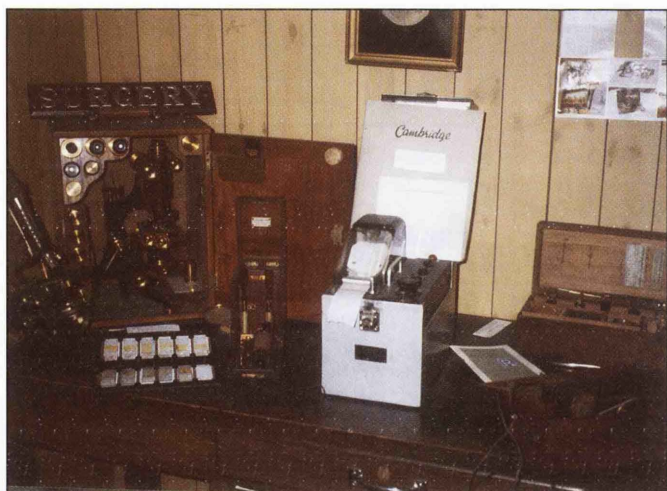
earliest phono and echocardiograms. She made sure that as they were replaced with more up to date equipment, the older pieces were preserved. She reasoned that they were of historical interest for future generations. When hospitals such as Beaumont and Westmorland County closed she ensured that any items that might be of historical interest were kept and not disposed of as junk.

We three colleagues frequently talked about a medical museum for the future but were always frustrated by the difficulties of finding both finance and a place for the museum. We visited the Royal Albert Hospital and the Lancaster Moor Hospital to inspect their own interesting internal museums. Sadly these were now gathering dust and were slowly falling into a state of decay. Nevertheless they contained a lot of fascinating items such as the wooden barrel a patient had lived in before being admitted to the Royal Albert with severe flexion deformities in his knees. These items we all agreed had to be preserved.

At this stage we sought advice from the Lancaster Museum service and there met Sue Ashworth, collections manager at the museum. She came and saw my collection as well as the collection made by the anaesthesia department at the RLI. She decided to have an exhibition drawn from this disparate collection in the Lancaster museum. This was displayed for several months in 1988 and proved very popular with the public.

We were now a group of four people but the crunch time came when both the Albert and Moor Hospitals were on the road to closure. At the same time I was moving to a house outside Lancaster with no cellars. What to do with all these collections? I went to see Mr S Sartin, curator of the Judges Lodgings, part of the County Museum Service. On viewing my collection he enthusiastically agreed to take it all for storage in the basement of the Judges Lodgings. Paul Whitfield, then chief executive of the hospitals group, was concerned about the hospitals' collections and after due debate agreed to sign them over to the County Museum Service. No proper committee existed at that time but we as a group decided to formalise our activities under the chairmanship of Richard Dendy, consultant maxillofacial surgeon. Sheila Charnley joined and provided excellent administrative support. Our ranks also swelled with John Davies, Adam Feldman and Miles Rucklidge, who has now taken over as chairman, following Mr Dendy's retirement in May 2003.

A huge amount of work has been put in by Valerie Anderson in twice-weekly visits to the Preston City museum, all voluntarily, where she has meticulously catalogued and continues to catalogue the bulk of the collection. Most of the collection resides there now but we have a promise that the objects may be loaned out to us on an indefinite basis. Valerie has also learned much from the staff there about cleaning, preserving and displaying the objects.



Museum display in author's cellar



Museum display in author's cellar

We now have enough material to fill a modest-sized museum but our problem is to find the space for displays and storage as well as an office area for cataloguing and storing records. We hope to find such space within the RLI but so far have been unsuccessful. We also need the finance to support

this. Attempts by John Dempsey to get money from the Millennium Fund and the Lottery Fund have been unsuccessful but we hope to access charitable funds through Alma Carruthers, who has joined our group.

The opening of the new education centre at RLI has given us the first opportunity to display a little of our collection through the two display cabinets in the foyer. These were set up by Valerie Anderson and John Davies with the help of Mandy Holten, who provided the written descriptions that accompany the display. This 'museum' was opened in November 2003 and has generated considerable interest. It is our intention to extend similar displays to other parts of the RLI where patients and the public can see them. A questionnaire of patients from orthopaedic outpatients has shown many would be interested and we hope to open our next display there in September.

Ultimately we hope to have a permanent display area that is accessible to the public and can be used for educational purposes by local schools. We also wish to collect records, photographs and tape recordings from people who have been patients or worked in the Lancaster hospitals.



Museum display in foyer of education centre, RLI

This project is important for all of us who treasure the heritage of Lancaster and its medical history. The biggest employer in Lancaster was at one time the health service. Now we have an opportunity to show the medical students who come from Liverpool that there is medical history and culture here.

I hope that all those who read this brief history will make an effort to seek out our exhibits and give us their comments. If anyone is interested in helping with this museum project, please contact our secretary, Judith Read, in the RLI Appeals Office (01524 583030). As most of our current members have retired from hospital work, we are particularly interested in welcoming younger people to help us and anyone who has appropriate objects should contact any committee member.

I owe thanks to Miles Rucklidge for his help with this article.