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EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENCE. TELLING THE
STORY OF MEDICINE AT THE THACKRAY MEDICAL
MUSEUM/LEEDS

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SUMMARY

Medical Museums can make substantial contributions to the cultural and social well-being of their audiences. The Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds continues to develop a wide range of educational activities that aim not only to educate the public about medical history and science research, but also to address issues that are at the heart of society today. Almut Grüner, CEO of the Thackray Museum, makes the case for medical museums to use their collections and their knowledge to make a difference in people's lives.

Introduction

The Museum was a fantastic eye opener, it was very interesting, beautifully presented – very enjoyable, fantastic experience.

(Visitor to Thackray Medical Museum, 17 November 2008)

Opened to the public in 1997, the Thackray Museum has one of the largest and broadest medical collections in the UK. In its short life so far, it has achieved a series of prestigious awards, including the Sandford Award for Museum Education and the Visitor Attraction of the Year Award. It was shortlisted for the European Museum of the

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Year award. The Thackray Museum's real achievement, however, lies in its continuous and creative efforts to expand the reach of its educational activities, aiming to make a positive difference in people's lives.

Museums have been, and still are, moving from places that exist mainly to collect, research and present artefacts and specimens towards being places with the purpose to make a difference in the society they operate in. This change in focus has been called museums' "*biggest culture shift in 150 years*"¹. Museums are playing a part in social change and tackle a range of social issues, becoming

central spaces of mutual understanding and cohesion where cultural identity can be developed.

There are many examples of how museums go beyond their traditional, inward looking roles and embrace the issues of their communities. Through their subject area, medical museums are well placed to do the same. At the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds, education in its widest sense is the means with which we attempt to change individuals in a way that has an impact on society – by giving them the knowledge and skills to change their views, lifestyle, health, and ultimately behaviours. Our education programmes cover a wide range of target groups and activities, from school group sessions to family activities; from lecture series on the history of medicine to outreach work in schools and the community; from web-based children's games to special events for everybody.

I would like to make the case for medical museums to embrace education in its widest possible sense – and become multi-dimensional, socially responsible institutions. Museums have a tremendous capacity for bringing knowledge to the public and enriching all facets of the human experience. They can help the public address and make informed choices about the challenges and opportunities they

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face. Most people are interested in their body and its functions – or malfunctions – which gives medical museums a vast range of possible themes and issues that are of relevance to their audiences. The idea that social change can be achieved through museum collections and education is not one that jeopardises museums’ own agendas. On the contrary, to engage with issues of relevance for people today is an opportunity to educate more people on more levels; to build knowledge about the museum’s collections; and to generate support from funders and other partners. More than that,

museums only fully develop their potential for action when they are actually involved in the major problems of contemporary society. Museums are institutions intended to serve society and only thus can they continue to exist and function².

Over the next few pages, I would like to illustrate how we are putting these principles into practice at the Thackray Museum in Leeds.

Thackray Museum Background

The Thackray Museum opened to the public in 1997. It received the first major capital grant awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in Yorkshire, and is now the largest specialist medical museum in the UK. The museum’s extensive galleries, temporary exhibitions and educational programmes explore the development of healthcare and medicine over the last 150 years in an educational and entertaining way. The museum is based in a 19th century former workhouse on the premises of St James’ Hospital in Leeds. The building houses the complete collections of the museum, approximately 5,000m² of exhibition galleries, four dedicated education rooms, conference centre, souvenir shop and a café.

The Thackray Museum collections embrace the history of medicine and healthcare from Roman times up to the present. We collect

medical equipment in all its shapes and forms, rather than human remains. Highlights of our collections are the John F Wilkinson collection of 17th and 18th century pharmaceutical ceramics, one of the world's largest collections of medical supply trade catalogues, and fine collection of medicine chests. Library and archive materials complete the object holdings of the museum.

The exhibition galleries were designed with the visitor in mind, aiming to create an experience which allows people to interact with the displays in a number of different ways. Information is conveyed in many layers, from the traditional text panels and labels to sounds and smells in a reconstructed 19th century backstreet of Leeds, early film footage of operations, computer based information and an interactive science centre where children can explore the workings of the human body. In a journey through time, the galleries tell the story of the origins and development of modern medicine and healthcare, scientific discoveries as well as the progress of modern surgery.

Education and social impact at the Thackray Museum

The Thackray Medical Museum was set up in 1995 as an independent museum for the benefit of the public. Its purpose according to its constitution is “to advance the education of the public in matters relating to medical treatment and products”, which means, in a narrow interpretation of the educational role of museums, that we use our collections to educate the public about the history of medicine. This in itself would not be specifically noteworthy; after all, education is one of the core museum purposes as defined by the International Council for Museums, ICOM³. However, the Thackray Museum is remarkable in that its galleries were designed, from the outset, to link directly with the National Curriculum, enabling teachers to build a visit to the Museum into their teaching of history and science subjects. Furthermore, we have a much wider understanding of our educational role – to make a difference in people's

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lives – and use our creative skills, our collections, resources and facilities to generate new ideas as to how this could be achieved.

Education for schools

From the outset, the provision for schools at the Thackray Museum was developed not only with the learning needs of pupils in mind, but also those of teachers who have to plan a visit to the museum as well as organise their lessons. The Museum offers a range of resources and training days that are designed to give teachers new ideas about how they might use the Museum's collections and galleries for their lessons, either on site at the Thackray Museum or back in the classroom. The Museum runs an annual programme of teacher training days that are part of the continuous personal development opportunities for the teaching profession. On these training days, teachers learn new skills and broaden their professional experience – in the Museum.

The offer for schools includes four dedicated education rooms that can be booked in advance; costumed interpreters who bring history to life for the children, and costumes for the younger children to get dressed up in and experience Victorian life; there are also information packs for teachers to plan and prepare their visits to the museum, resources for teaching in the classroom; themed sessions and workshops designed for school groups and run by museum staff, linking gallery content directly to the schools curriculum; and free resources, including online games for children, that are available on the Museum's own website as well as on a regional website called MyLearning which hosts free learning resources⁴. The emphasis of the schools provision is on experience rather than on replicating class-room learning in the museum environment. School children can meet characters such as Florence Nightingale or a Victorian school teacher, complete with costumes and manners of the time.

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The 25,000 school children who visit the Thackray Museum each year on organised school groups constitute about a third of all visitors to the museum. The majority of school groups are based in Yorkshire, but a substantial number of them come from much further afield, including the South of England, Northern Ireland, and the Isle of Man. Our estimate is that half of all students studying the Medicine through Time curriculum in the country have visited or are going to visit the Thackray Museum as part of their course.

In future, we intend to further develop our schools programme. In the pipeline is a pilot to develop and test outreach boxes with handling objects and teaching resources that can be posted out to schools on demand. We were fortunate to receive sponsorship from the medical plastics industry to develop our pilot scheme based on the science curriculum and containing samples of medical plastics products. The Museum Education Officer is currently working with a science teacher and a science adviser from Leeds City Council to develop the content of the plastics outreach box. Once the logistics of sending the boxes to schools have been finalised, we will be promoting our new outreach resources to schools – and increase the reach of the Thackray Museum beyond those schools who can afford to visit the museum itself. By expanding the schools offer from history to science, we are also able to provide up to date science information for science teachers, who find it notoriously difficult to keep abreast of new developments in their subject area.

Projects with schools

While our regular schools programme continues to be successful, we are also involved in specific projects with a small number of partner schools. One such project is “Campaign! Make an Impact” which is led by the British Library (London) and involves several museum partners across the country. In “Campaign!” students from our partner school are acquiring campaigning skills by firstly learning

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about historical public campaigns (such as the 19th century public health campaign led by Edwin Chadwick) and experiencing the dirt, filth and health problems which inspired the Victorian campaign for public health reform; secondly by extracting from historic examples of public campaigning, and finally by applying the same principles to develop a campaign based on a theme that the students themselves are interested in.

In March 2008, teenagers from Immanuel College in Bradford, our partner school, worked with an experienced media artist. Inspired by the past, pupils used their new skills to plan and run modern day campaigns about issues that affect them today. Pupils chose subjects including bullying in school, child abuse, littering and healthy school meals for their campaigns. They learned about broadcasting technology and software as well as how to plan a campaign. The pupils researched their topics; mind-mapped their campaigns; came up with a group name and logo and planned and designed resources including t-shirts and badges. Each group researched, wrote, recorded and edited two audio pieces to support their campaign including a rap, personal stories, interviews, adverts and poems. The resulting audio clips now feature as a permanent electronic display in the Thackray Museum galleries. The students learned that health and medicine is about more than remedies and surgery. They gained confidence from the knowledge that they can help change society if they want to.

In spring 2009, we will involve another partner school in Leeds and a group of local comedians/ musicians with a new campaigning scheme. This time, the historic campaign will be around family planning, the Museum's first attempt at tackling issues around contraception and sexual health – a social issue that is highly relevant in a country that has the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the European Union. Indeed, our aims with this particular project are two-fold. On the one hand, we want to continue the “Campaign!” project because it allows students to get deeply involved with a particular health

campaign, but also gives them citizenship skills that are relevant beyond the immediate historical knowledge. On the other hand, we chose family planning and contraception because we acknowledge that as a medical museum with a small collection of sexual health related objects, we can potentially have an impact on the communities we serve.

In a consultation with target groups, we learned that there is clearly a need for more and better education in this area. Teachers felt that they were using outdated educational tools to teach the subject in schools. University students told us they felt let down by schools that do not teach sexual health adequately, and the UK Youth Parliament published a manifesto asking for better sexual education in schools⁵. That was more than enough evidence for us to decide that we could make a (social) difference if we worked with young people and teachers on this subject. The value of such in-depth working with a school cannot be overestimated:

Where students worked on projects that were linked to their lives, they gained confidence and courage and showed the possibility of becoming more resourceful and determined learners⁶.

Working with children outside of school

The Thackray Museum has run several schemes for children of school age which take place outside of school hours – activities which in UK government terms are called “education activities in settings other than schools”. This includes a series of science clubs for teenagers, giving them the opportunity to experiment with science without the performance or peer pressure that they might experience in school. The science club kids, a group of between 12 and 16 children, went to visit a real science laboratory at the University of Huddersfield. The children met scientists and learned, in an informal and friendly

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environment, about science-related career opportunities and gained hands-on lab experience.

In 2006, one of the science club groups became involved with the development of “Body Parts: New for Old”, an exhibition about body implants and artificial limbs developed by Thackray Museum curators in co-operation with industry specialists. The children worked alongside the curators and designers to develop the exhibition content, which includes some hands-on interactive stations. At the opening of the exhibition, the science club children guided adults through the exhibition, explaining the concept and content to them. In addition to picking up on the history and development of artificial limbs, the children learned important social skills, giving them confidence and a sense of achievement. The experience of science as being fun might encourage some of the children to continue their involvement with science subjects, but the confidence and interpersonal skills will help them whatever the educational route they choose.

Family Learning

In addition to education programmes for schools and school-age children, the Thackray Museum continues to develop a programme of family learning. Aimed at a widely defined audience of virtually all age groups, the objective of the family learning programme is to offer additional levels of learning experience and engagement to what is already offered in the galleries and exhibitions. The activities range from drop-in medicine related arts sessions during school holidays to outreach activities that involve patients in the cancer wards in the hospital adjacent to the Thackray Museum, and from one-off evening performances by artists and comedians to themed investigative trails through the galleries for young visitors.

Our neighbourhood does not only include one of Europe’s largest teaching hospitals, but also amongst England’s most deprived areas. Per capita income is far lower than the national average; teenagers

leave school relatively early; the population is culturally and ethnically diverse. These are people who are not easily convinced to visit museums, nor do they consider museums as being “for them”. From a different point of view, these are potential new audiences who might benefit more than any other from our education programmes. In order to attract a family audience from the area around the Museum, we have begun a programme of special events weekends. We hold an annual “Teddy Bear Festival”, complete with teddy bear clinic, an appearance of Paddington Bear both “in person” and on screen, and an exploratory trail for young children through the Museum.

This event, which we organise in co-operation with one of Britain’s largest medical research charities, Action Medical Research, is deliberately low key, but it is designed to attract people who do not usually visit museums: those with low incomes and low educational attainment, as well as carers with younger children who might not expect museums to be particularly attractive for their children. We are aware that those target groups might need encouragement beyond just a different range of activities, and have thus included free entry for any visitor bringing a teddy bear. The statistics for this event are quite encouraging: between a quarter and a third of all visitors who attended the 2008 Teddy Bear Festival lived near the Museum and had never before visited. It is a low-profile success, but a success none the less in that we managed to break down barriers for an audience that traditionally has little motivation to visit museums.

Further annual events include a weekend of free entry for residents of the Museum’s local area, a 19th century Christmas celebration and regional crafts fair, and an Historic Ambulances day. Our hope is that with these events, we will not only put the Thackray Museum firmly on the map as a place to take younger children, but also as a non-traditional museum that welcomes all people.

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History of medicine

For ten years, the Thackray Museum has been running a series of Saturday morning lectures on the history of medicine. The concept is as simple as it is successful: using his many contacts in the world of academic medical research and the history of medicine, Prof Monty Losowsky, the Museum's chairman, invites speakers of high calibre who can also captivate a lay audience. This last point is of particular importance because it ensures that the lectures are entertaining as well as educating, easy to follow but still representing scientific or historical research. The attendance figures of the Medicine and History Lecture series are unusually high for such an event, stretching the Museum's largest auditorium to full capacity with between 110 and 130 delegates. In fact, the medical history lectures are probably one of the Thackray Museum's greatest achievements, in that they encourage the audience to explore factors that have influenced changes in medicine and health. Delegates enjoy access to a range of subject specialists and have the rare opportunity to engage in discussions with them. In the words of one delegate to a lecture about probiotics and the claim of the benefits of "good bacteria" that are made by the yoghurt producing industries, the Thackray Museum's history of medicine programme is "*the only place where you can be sure that you get specialist knowledge but without the money interest.*" An added benefit is that the lectures are accredited for educational development programmes for health professionals.

The Thackray Museum offers university students the opportunity to research the history of medicine for their Student Select Components, which are an integral part of the undergraduate medical curriculum. Medical students are offered a choice of themed placements allowing them to study in depth an area that is of particular interest to them – and to the Museum. In addition to gaining knowledge in the history of medicine, medical students also build research skills, critical appraisal skills and a broad range of interpersonal skills.

We also accept applications for placements from students in higher education, undergraduates as well as postgraduates. The Museum accommodates a broad range of subjects – from Museum Studies to Leisure Management, from Marketing to History to Computer and Natural Sciences. Finally, the Thackray Museum hosts three PhD research studentships based on collections related in partnership with Leeds University. The research informs the development of exhibitions and education activities, and helps the museum to build in-depth knowledge about specific areas of our collections.

Conclusion

Where, in all this, is the social change? There can be no doubt that the development of medical treatments and healthcare has – and continues to have – substantial public impact. Would it not make sense that the museums that have medical history at their heart have a social role to play as well? I certainly believe that they do, and the Thackray Museum is a good example for making it work. Providing the evidence of social impact, however, is not always an easy task, and medical museums are well advised to try and collect such evidence. At the Thackray Museum, we believe that we can prove that our programmes and activities make a difference in today's society in a number of ways, for example:

1. Our education programmes influence career choices. An example is the girl who visited the Museum's forensic science exhibition and is now studying Forensic Science at university instead of her previous favourite subject, music. Encouraging more young people to get trained in science related subjects is high on the UK Government's agenda, as it is seen to be important for the future of innovation in the UK's economy.⁷ Pupils from the "Campaign!" project said they became interested in studying history after they participated in the project and found that history is relevant for their interests today.

2. Our education programmes provide unbiased information about current scientific research. Whether through medical research professionals or specialists in the history of medicine, the lecture series as well as the schools resources are informing our audiences of a wide variety of aspects of scientific research, with the additional benefit of being hosted by an organisation that is seen as objective and encouraging debate. Written feedback from delegates at the lecture series tells us that people felt empowered “to make life-style choices because of what we heard today”.

3. Our education programmes use historical information to inform the present. In all that we do, the focus is on experiential learning and relevance for the audience. Teachers often provide feedback about the usefulness of led sessions – we know that “the children have come away with a greater knowledge and understanding to apply in their work”, and that “it was a really good opportunity to develop speaking and listening skills through (historical) role play”.

4. Our education programmes give people confidence and new choices for their lives. A young girl known in her school as a selective mute (she never spoke in school) attended the Museum’s science club. At the end of the programme, she guided a group of adults through an exhibition she had been involved in. Moved by the girl’s engagement, the head-teacher revealed to museum staff that she had never before heard the girl speak.

Whether being socially relevant is the greatest change in museums in the past 150 years, I do not know. That it is one of the greatest opportunities for medical museums to have an impact on people’s lives, I have absolutely no doubt. Many of today’s social issues have a medical dimension, obesity and healthy eating, the abuse of alcohol, sexual health and the provision of national healthcare – to name but a few. Medical museums, in my view, have the great opportunity “to engage

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*actively in the design and delivery of experiences that have the power to inspire and change the way people see both the world and the possibility of their own lives.”*⁸ The fundamental question that museums have to answer is, according to Stephen Weil, “*If our museums are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving people’s lives, on what alternative basis might we possibly ask for public support?*”⁹

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