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DISPENSING HISTORY, ART AND MYSTERY IN THE  
MEDICAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

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SUMMARY

*The installation of an 1849 Savory & Moore Pharmacy has been a popular attraction for visitors, yet under-utilised in the Museum as a means through which a deeper understanding of the making and taking of medication could be told. The opportunity to research and present these stories to a wider field of viewers in an online multimedia production is discussed here, and is set within the context of the challenges met by the Museum in terms of its relevance and sustainability within a University focused on the future as a graduate University. Under the radical reform of its curriculum, funding and students are more likely to be attracted to medical science than medical history, unless new questions are put to historical items and ways sought to draw on the curiosity and imagination of students who might gain a greater breadth of knowledge by learning through engagement with original objects.*

*Introduction*

In the early months of 1971, one hundred and seventy six pallets of Late Regency cabinetry comprising the shop fittings of a London branch of the Savory & Moore Pharmacy arrived at the University of Melbourne Medical History Museum (MHM). How and why this small nineteenth-century pharmacy found its way across the globe to be installed in the Museum, have been questions frequently asked by visitors – now

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answered in the first modules of a multimedia project on the pharmacy, underway at MHM – and the subject matter of this article<sup>1</sup>.

The story commences in 1967 with the establishment of the Medical History Unit with its Museum and Rare Books Collection by Professor Ken Russell. It was an initiative generously funded by the Wellcome Trust, the London-based institution dedicated globally to the promotion and development of the history of medicine, though its funding and research facilities. Professor Russell was known to the Trust through his visits to the Wellcome Library where he had researched and produced a number of publications of bibliographic nature. When it became known that the Trust had rescued the internal fittings of a recently closed down Victorian pharmacy, removed from its premises at 29 Chapel Street, Belgravia, and that, as custodian, it was offering these fittings to an institution that taught the history of medicine, Professor Russell quickly registered his interest. After considerable correspondence between the University and the Trust, Her Majesty's Customs, and insurance and forwarding agents in late 1970–71, the little pharmacy finally made its way in a shipping container to the port of Melbourne, a journey again generously funded by the Wellcome Trust.

With the aid of just seven black and white photographs of the pharmacy in its London setting, and a simple plan of the internal fittings to guide them, the University of Melbourne's architect and carpenters succeeded in reinstalling the little shop almost exactly as it had appeared in London. A series of photographs, now part of the Museum's archives, have recorded this painstaking installation process.

The cost of the final leg of the pharmacy's journey, from the wharves to the University, and its installation at MHM, was met by a then-anonymous private benefactor who, now known to us, almost forty years later has again demonstrated his support for this little pharmacy and the Museum by meeting the costs of the making of the DVD and interactive media resource<sup>2</sup>.

*The “problem” defined*

Although the pharmacy had always generated much interest, and a degree of surprise in visitors when first coming upon it in the Museum, it seemed that after this initial impression, the pharmacy did not readily divulge any more of its secrets. Unless there was a guided tour underway that might more fully explain its workings, it stood as a rather static display, and one at risk of being seen as a quaint relic of the past. Little new research had been carried out, nor further material added to its files since the 1970s, and the current curator felt that the little 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 a broader social history of medicine.

In considering how to deal with the under-utilisation of this significant part of the Museum’s collection, it was felt that new ways needed to be found to invigorate and interpret the pharmacy. Thus began a project that would actively engage both public and student visitors in a process of ‘Knowledge Transfer’ and ‘Teaching and Learning’, both prime activities and educational goals recently identified by the University as part of its new Melbourne Model<sup>3</sup>.

Although recently given new emphasis by the University, its Museums have in fact always been involved with ‘knowledge transfer’, and the Medical History Museum is no exception<sup>4</sup>. The communicating and sharing of ideas has been established not only through its traditional channels of exhibition and public programs, but also more recently through teaching support, where lecturers bring their students to the Museum for tutorials, or practical sessions<sup>5</sup>. Here, the focus has been on the artefacts themselves, and the Museum is keen that these sessions should expand under the new structure of the university curriculum, with artefacts actually drawing forth the ideas rather than merely illustrating given facts in a prescribed text. In this example it can be seen how Museum has taken up the challenges posed by the recent changes in course structure

and content so as to remain both relevant into the future, and an active participant in the new Teaching and Learning environment .

Further thinking as to how such challenges might be met in the project being realised, brought to the fore the particular circumstances in which museums in universities operate. Although the primary concern of most museums (within, and outside universities) is with authentic artefacts and their capacity to communicate ideas, museums within universities operate in particular environments that privilege academic activity over the cultural, and text as the principal conveyor of ideas. This has led to a tendency for universities to see their (historical) collections and museums as being more of a cultural gloss, rather than playing a direct or significant role in the academic program, and this can leave our museums in a vulnerable position. Given the financial pressures under which universities now operate, areas which are seen as not paying their way - by attracting grants, or rendering valuable services - can be seen as a drain on dwindling resources and may face an uncertain future<sup>6</sup>.

### *Constraints of funding*

Whilst there may be early signs that teaching support from museums can provide fresh ways of engaging the minds of students, of stimulating the imagination and of facilitating learning, funding from within the University, or from government or corporate bodies for the research we conduct, proves difficult to attract. Funding from these sources, particularly within the biosciences, privileges those engaged in what is perceived as more urgent 'real research', conducted in laboratories or within certain communities, and more likely to lead to tangible outcomes. Given this situation, funding for university museums is more successfully sourced from philanthropic bodies or charitable trusts, although even here it can be presumed that as part of a university, museums already 'get enough'. Consequently, while holding significant parts of the university's (and in instances

national) heritage, university museums generally remain too under-resourced to achieve their potential.

Under these circumstances the University of Melbourne's museums are fortunate to have the support of a Cultural Collections Committee (CCC, established in 2004). This assistance has been implemented through CCC initiatives such as its small grants program, and through the increased promotion of the University's collections. Whilst the MHM has been successful in attracting several of these small grants, which tend to be awarded for fundamental collection management projects, funding for the presentation of new and more explorative ways of interpreting the collection remains difficult to access<sup>7</sup>.

It was therefore serendipitous that, 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 a call from a member of the public, enquiring after the welfare of the small pharmacy. In the course of what turned out to be a lengthy conversation with this gentleman, the proposed project for a more active role for the pharmacy in the communication of ideas was raised. It led not only to the discovery of the identity of the Pharmacy's original Melbourne donor, but also to the outcome that we had been offered the means with which to proceed with our multimedia production<sup>8</sup>.

### *Living history*

In addition to the teaching support provided by the MHM through its tutorials, 'knowledge transfer' has also been well underway in the MHM as part of its Public Program, where guided tours of the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions are conducted for groups in the wider community<sup>9</sup>.

Amongst the visitors in 2007, was one group that proved to be significant. Five old friends came particularly to visit the Savory and Moore pharmacy, and to recall again their experiences in the familiar

atmosphere of a pharmacy such as those in which they had spent their working lives<sup>10</sup>.

These men were among the last generation of students who had learned extensively, the mixing of prescriptions and other medications by hand, 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. They were among the last practitioners of skills that had evolved since medicine's earliest history. Listening to their sharp recollections, as student-apprentices and as practitioners, it became evident that here might lie an opportunity for the making of a recording in video and sound, to preserve their memories and skills. These recordings might, at the same time, provide the material for a multimedia production, with modules focusing on a more social and experiential history of pharmacy, made available to the Savory & Moore Pharmacy visitors, and in on the MHM website.

### *The multimedia project*

The overall project will on completion consist of 4 modules which will be available to play in the Museum on a continual loop system activated by the visitor, and, with an online component (available by mid 2009), will provide an educational resource for those unable to visit the MHM in person.

The first of the two modules now completed, takes the form of still images and voiceover, and provides a brief account of the history of the pharmacy, and its arrival and installation in the Museum. It also takes the viewer on a tour of the pharmacy, introducing him or her to its main features including both the display and working areas. Whilst not intending to replace the experience of coming face to face with the actual artefacts themselves, this presentation aims at orientating and preparing the visitor for a richer and fuller experience that lies ahead on entering the pharmacy itself.

The second presentation is in the form of a DVD with sound track. Filmed within the Pharmacy, it demonstrates the hand preparation or dispensing of medicines as practiced in a period before the mass production of the large pharmaceutical companies of today.

The pharmacists were approached and their interest in participating in the making of the video recording was gauged - and enthusiastically taken up. It was proposed that this might take the form of each pharmacist preparing a prescription of his own choice, using the pharmacy equipment, and carrying out their activity at the Savory & Moore preparator's bench.

Meanwhile, a team was drawn together from the University's Biomedical Multimedia Unit and from the Digital Media Services, Information and Educational Services film production team. Meetings took place over several months, a time line drawn up, and scripts researched and written for the pharmacists. Some of these meetings included our actors, the (four available) pharmacists, now fully engaged and keen as the project took shape.

The making of the four component video clips comprising the DVD was to commence first, so these actions were pinned down with the assistance of the pharmacists, who had decided between them who would be responsible for the preparation of the ointment, the pills, the mixture and the suppositories to be featured in the film.

Production included the preparation of the scripts for our actors; the procurement of equipment, ingredients and other props that would be required; lighting, sound, and camera positioning tests; and a rehearsal. Filming day took place in mid December 2007, with simultaneous (real time) recordings of the background sounds (of pestle grinding against mortar and spatula against marble slab), so as to add to the authenticity of the activity taking place. Later, in early February 2008, the voice of each pharmacist explaining the steps involved in the mixing their prescriptions was recorded (whilst watching their edited film clips) in the University's Horwood Sound

Recording Studio. A further voice recording of the pharmacists engaged in informal and often amusing recollection of their student days and early practice experiences was conducted at this same session, and completed the sound track for the video module.

The second module consisted of the researched story of the pharmacy's arrival, a little of its Savory & Moore history, and a 'walk through' the pharmacy with voiceover describing the major features encountered. Its production involved the use of historical photographs as well new, high-resolution shots taken of the cabinets, shelves and bench tops filled with their equipment, pharmacy bottles and ceramic jars; the manager's area with desk, stool and prescription books, where records were strictly maintained; and the Savory & Moore window display with its show globes of coloured waters fancy glass stoppers. A prototype of these two major modules, conveying their impression of both the art and the mystery of pharmacy, were finished in time for a preview launch at the Museum in March 2008 as a component of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the University's Centre for Health and Society.

The finished productions now play in the Museum for visitors as an introduction to the pharmacy, shown on a screen and through a video player purchased from the funding, and affixed to the wall in the Museum space. Separating this modern equipment from the Savory & Moore Pharmacy itself was felt necessary to maintain the pharmacy's authenticity, without intrusion from recent technology. By encouraging viewing of the video before entering the pharmacy, it is hoped that visitors will be more involved with the experience of what it might have felt like to visit the pharmacy several generations ago. Responses from visitors, particularly on special Open Days and tours, are enthusiastic and recorded in the Museum Visitors' Book. Readers are likewise invited to visit the MHM (or its website)<sup>11</sup>, and experience for themselves this 'enlivened' pharmacy, and perhaps along the way



experience with some delight, a little of ‘the history, art and mystery’ of pharmacy.

*Recent developments*

Following further research carried out in Sept 2008 in archives in Warwickshire, and in London, substantial material for the film scripts of two final components are in preparation and scheduled for recording in February 2009. They reveal a rich and comprehensive the history of the firm of Savoy & Moore firm, which, for the continued involvement of family members in the firm for over 100 years, is largely a family history. It reveals the firm’s contribution to the development of pharmacy as a more regulated profession, and professional body through the involvement of the second head of the firm in the establishment of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. In addition, the patent medicines and equipment designed by Savory & Moore, and the Royal warrants they held for the supply of medicines to members of the Royal household over several generations indicate that this was no ordinary class of Chemists and Druggists. The role the company played in the national interest is indicated by material evidence located in the archives of Lloydspharmacy in Warwickshire, England, where plans and documents record the medicines and equipment they produced and supplied to British troops in military campaigns, from the Crimean War to World War II.

The actual panniers and field medical chests supplied by the firm (and formerly part of the Wellcome Collection), are located in the National Science Museum, London, and photographs of this equipment is being made available to the MHM. Additional research material, and photographs relating to the firm, have also been supplied by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London, and the Wellcome Trust Library and Picture Collection, to whose archivists I am most grateful. This

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*History and art in the Medical Museum of Melbourne*

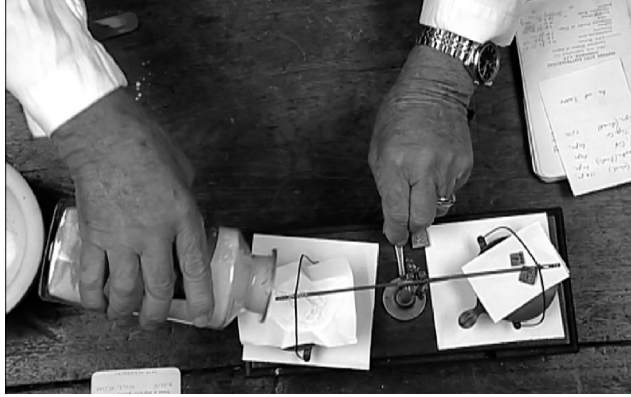


Fig. 1-5 - Retired pharmacist (Brian Cossar) demonstrating the making of a prescription medicine (a pain relieving emulsion of A.P.C (Aspirin, Phenacetin and Caffein), at the preparator's bench of the 1849 London Pharmacy, an installation now part of the Collection of the Melbourne Medical History Museum



Fig.6 - The film crew pauses whilst the director (Ian Shiel) discusses an aspect of filming with retired pharmacist (Neil Hookey), concerning the use of the pharmacy scales, for the film clip of his preparation of Colocynth pills



Fig.7 - A view down the interior of the Savory & Moore pharmacy showing its fine carved mahogany cabinetry and shelves of drug bottles. The high counter allowed the pharmacist some privacy for his work, whilst also, the scrutiny of his shop.

material adds substantially to that already in Melbourne, and will be incorporated into final stories of the project.

The rich accumulation of reference material, bibliographic information, photographs and scans brought together from the libraries, archives, museums and professional societies in UK, will form a valuable resource within the MHM, for researchers in the future to use, shedding further light, no doubt, on this fascinating but infrequently presented aspect of medical history.

### *Conclusion*

This project on the Savory & Moore pharmacy, with its video and online multimedia components, is one example of how the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne is responding to the challenges to its sustainability and relevance within the University. In the process of finding new ways of actively engaging its student and public audiences, the Museum has provided a richer and more engaging experience for those who access the museum. Through the use of fresh approaches and new techniques the MHM hopes to promote further interest in its collection, bringing to light new questions on the history of pharmacy and the part it has played in the larger story of health and medicine today.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES

1. This article concerns the solution that was found to the problem of interpreting and presenting an important, but underachieving part of the Collection to a wider audience, in a more engaging and informative manner. Within the framework of the prevailing circumstances under which the MHM operates, the reader can follow how plans evolved for making of a series of multimedia modules that will teach the history and share the experience of being in a 19th century pharmacy.
2. J.Geoff Donaldson, AO, has recently identified himself as the early donor who

funded the costs of the pharmacy's transport and installation in Melbourne. Following a career in the stock exchange and as a company director, Geoff Donaldson's only connection with the University or with pharmacy had been through interests shared with Prof. Russell, as club members of The Melbourne Scots, and at food and wine appreciation gatherings. The MHM is most grateful for this distinguished ninety year old gentleman's continued generosity and interest, in helping to see this project through.

3. This is the new strategic plan developed by the University of Melbourne involving a radical reform of its curriculum. It has adopted the graduate school concept, offering Bachelor degrees in six new undergraduate programs, following which students can then choose to undertake a more specialised graduate professional degree, or to pursue a higher research degree. By leaving subject specialisation to a later stage in the education process, it is hoped that all graduates will benefit from a greater breadth of knowledge.
4. Through its exhibition program, guided tours for a wide variety of groups from within and outside the university, participation in Open Days, presentation of conference papers and web publications, and through the many research and public enquiries it services, the Museum has long involved its communities in a process of 'Knowledge Transfer'.
5. Undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking units in History (*The Secret Life of Things*); History and Philosophy of Science (*Medicine & Society from the Magical to the Molecular*); Advanced Medical Science, Conservation of Cultural Materials, and Art Curatorship indicate the range of academic disciplines involved in this more imaginative and engaging way of learning.
6. This point has been well expressed by BOYLAN P. J., *European Cooperation in the Protection and promotion of the University Heritage*. University Museums and Collections, ICOM Study Series (Cahiers d'étude) 2003; 11: 31.
7. This fairly modest funding, which has recently started to become available from bequests made to the University, is awarded biannually, (by submission through the CCC), and enables certain fundamental tasks to be carried out in the more needy of the University's thirty-three cultural collections. For example the awarding of these small grants has enabled the MHM to complete the upgrading of its card catalogue to an online facility, and the installation of appropriate lighting for the display of rare medical books in several display cases.
8. This gift (\$A30,000) is covering the total cost of the project.

*History and art in the Medical Museum of Melbourne*

9. These have recently included such groups as the Medical History Society of Victoria, Friends of the Baillieu Library, PROBUS (Retired Professional and Business groups), U3A ( University of 3rd Age), museum donors and supporters, and visitors during their Senior Citizens Week, University Open and Orientation Days, tours for prospective and overseas students and parents, and those conducted for secondary school students, and other universities and institutes teaching nursing, medical technology, and the training of pharmacy assistants.
10. These men were all retired retail pharmacists who had served apprenticeships, and attended lectures at the Melbourne Pharmacy College in the late 1940s and the 1950s, where they were introduced to 'the art and mystery of pharmacy'. The phrase also lends itself to the title of the MHM's 'Savoy & Moore' production underway, and to the themes of art (as also in the sense of a skill), and mystery, that run through it.
11. [www.chs.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.chs.unimelb.edu.au) and follow the links to the Medical History Museum

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