

Collections Mapping Summary of Findings

The UK Medical Collections Group (UKMCG) aims to improve the use of medical collections for public benefit by developing collection strategies and promoting collaboration.

The mapping exercise provides an overview of relevant expertise, knowledge and institutional needs within the sector.

The medical collections mapping survey was undertaken to help the SSN establish a clear picture of the strengths of medical and related collections and of subject knowledge and expertise across the UK. The results of the mapping exercise provide an overview of the scale, range, and status of medical material within a wide range of institutions, including museums, libraries and archives. We expect to use the data from the mapping exercise to underpin our strategy for medical & healthcare collections.

The mapping exercise was undertaken as desk-based research using a self-completion survey questionnaire and associated research via published material including internet sources. In April 2008, the questionnaire was distributed to 360 organisations. Over the following months, 102 institutions and individuals provided some form of contribution to the mapping survey.

The responses represented 95 collections, of which just over half had a medical or healthcare focus; nearly half the medical collections covered by the survey were therefore part of a wider collection, eg social or local history. Over half the responses are from museums; archives are the next largest group, followed by libraries.

A wealth of medical collections

The survey identified a wealth of medical and healthcare material in the 95 collections that are represented in this survey. In excess of 3 million items and groups of items are held in museums, libraries and archives across the country. The collections in the survey cover at least 20 different subjects. After general medicine, the most frequently represented subjects are pharmacy, nursing, surgery, public health, dentistry and anaesthesia. Most institutions hold a range of types of collection material; the most frequently represented types of material are: objects and artefacts; photographs; archives; ephemera; and historic books. The materials are of national, regional, local and general significance. Medical collections tend to have the greater proportions of general and nationally significant collections.

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The majority of the collections were established during the 20th century, though there are some long-established ones, as well. A significant amount of medical material is held within non-medical collections.

Access

The majority of both collections and the material held within institutions are publicly accessible, but only a small percentage of material is on display. Very little material is on loan to other institutions. Electronic access does exist through a number of internet-based collection gateways, but none are fully comprehensive. Computer and internet access is variable, overall less than a third and a sixth of material is accessible.

A majority of collections have access to some specialist subject knowledge, but provision is not consistent; around a third of collections have no access to any relevant expertise – the majority being non-medical institutions.

Collection-related activities

Around half the institutions have gaps in their medical collections, but only a third are actively collecting. Less than a third of institutions have rationalised or are rationalising medical collections.

Non-medical institutions tend to have more collection-related expertise, especially in the areas of documentation, environmental monitoring & control, display and storage. Two-thirds of institutions want to do more with their medical collections; development areas include objects & artefacts and archives & records. Just over a quarter of institutions provide training in collection-related activities.

Most institutions need help and advice in several areas of collection activity; the greatest needs are in audience development; education, outreach, interpretation and conservation. Over a half of institutions have developed education resources using medical collections; around three-quarters of medical-focused collections have education resources. Over three-quarters of institutions want to develop partnerships; nearly all medical-focused collections would participate in partnerships.

Conclusion – and further action

The wealth of medical material in archives and libraries needs further exploration. There are opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise across the medical collections sector and with other organisations. Institutions are generally positive about collection development and partnership opportunities. The mapping results provide base data from which a strategy

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for medical collections will be developed by the UK Medical Collections Group. The survey identifies some immediate need for action across the Group, for example:

- Some on-line archive and library databases would benefit from collection level descriptions, highlighting collection content and strengths, and improving accessibility to all users.
- Knowledge about the medical collection material is not evenly distributed; some major institutions lack expertise in important areas.
- There are opportunities for improving access to medical collections, including more artefacts on display, loans across and outside the sector, and greater internet access to collection information.
- There are opportunities for partnership projects involving museum, library and archive collections, involving both medical and non-medical collections.

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