

Learning from the past: The Manchester Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine



SUMMARY

The Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine, based in the University of Manchester, combines research and teaching with an innovative outreach programme. The many activities at the

Centre are based on the ideas that it is important to understand the past in its own right and that such work can also inform the approaches we take to current debates in science and medicine.

Background

A young woman covered in the scabs of impetigo and scabies infections confronted people at the Wellcome Trust's Engaging Science conference in 2006. This gory display is one of the many imaginative and innovative ways in which researchers at the University of Manchester's Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine are communicating their expertise to the public.

The Manchester Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine (as was) was started in 1986 by Professor John Pickstone as part of the Centre. Since 2002, Professor Michael Worboys has been the Director of the Centre, and in 2004 the Centre joined the Faculty of Life Sciences at the University. This change has enabled staff to work more closely with researchers, postgraduates and undergraduates in the biological sciences, while also developing their strong links with other faculties.

The Centre has a Trust-funded programme officer who has pioneered new approaches, engaging particularly with schools and through activities based in museums, science festivals and wider outreach programmes.



Advance

The Manchester Centre now has nine staff who work with postdoctoral fellows, doctoral students, undergraduates and visitors. Research has focused on medicine and medical science since the Industrial Revolution, with much of it now on the 20th century. Recent specialist projects have looked at sport medicine, medical technologies, laboratory animals, blindness, deafness, tissue culture, screening and the molecularisation of medicine.

Researchers often use local history to enrich their work. Michael Brown is studying the medical profession in Victorian Britain, and in Neil Pemberton's and Michael Worboys's recent book on rabies – *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* – they showed the Lancastrian experience of the disease and explored local connections with international centres, such as the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

Researchers also work on national and international issues, such as Rob Kirk's study of changing practices around the welfare of laboratory animals, Elizabeth Toon's study of health screening in Britain, a recently completed study that compared the development of hip replacement surgery in Britain and the USA, Lyn Schumaker's work on the history of the health of mine workers in Zambia, and Katherine Foxhall's research on the health of migrants.

John Pickstone and Carsten Timmermann lead the Trust-funded project on 'Constructing Cancers', which is exploring the development of medical knowledge, technologies, services and public responses since 1945. This work contributes to today's public dialogue and policy making on cancer treatment, and complements the strong tradition of cancer research and therapy at the University of Manchester Medical School.

How it's making a difference

In addition to training postdoctoral fellows and doctoral students, the Centre offers a Master's-level history of medicine degree, which is also available for medical students. This is part of a wider involvement with the Medical School, where 40 students each year undertake research projects with Centre staff. They spend three weeks on primary research and writing, and tend to do projects linked to their clinical interests. Topics studied include childhood depression, parasitic worms across the world through time and pharmaceutical companies. The Centre also teaches history of medicine courses to undergraduates in the University, including innovative option modules such as 'Baker Street to CSI: The history of forensic medicine'.

The Centre was also one of the first history of medicine groups to have a dedicated outreach post to identify, meet and engage with new audiences. The programme, led by Emm Barnes, involves a wide range of events, from designing and running workshops to liaising with the national media. The academics have found that taking their work to the public can feed back into research, as members of an audience approach the staff to tell revealing stories of patient experiences, and sometimes offer materials and contacts. Dr Barnes is now involved in the design of a new A level – Science and Society – offered by the Nuffield Centre.

The field of public health is a good example of the links between research and outreach at the Manchester Centre. Staff have published on the public health movement of the 19th century, which focused on industrial towns such as Manchester. The Manchester Primary Care Trust has funded a project on recent local issues in public health. The results of this work were brought to school audiences at the recent 'Our Kid' events, organised in Manchester by Nowgen to mark the 60th anniversary of the NHS.

Next steps

The current work at the Centre is structured around its Wellcome Trust Strategic Award on medicine and modernity. The staff are also developing new research themes on the molecularisation of medicine, animal health and welfare, and contemporary history.

In 2009, the Constructing Cancer project will be working with people with cancer – both past and present patients – and their families to record their experiences of cancer treatment using words and pictures. These records will then be made accessible through museums and the project's website (www.cancer-history.org).

References

www.chstm.manchester.ac.uk

www.cancer-history.org

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Timeline of the Manchester Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine

