

Promoting the history of medicine through special collections: the experience of Campus Bio-Medico University Library (Rome, Italy)

Sofia Fagiolo

Campus Bio-Medico University, Rome, Italy

Abstract

Preserving the history of medicine is an important task for health sciences librarians. In this regard, the provision of special collections can play a significant role. This article presents the initiative of the University of Rome Campus Bio-Medico Library (UCBML) in creating valuable sources for the history of medicine through the establishment of several special collections. The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of special collections to promote issues relating to the field of medical history.

Key words: *Campus Bio-Medico University Library; medical university libraries; special collections; history of medicine.*

Introduction

Special collections of academic libraries can play an important role in the intellectual life of their parent institution, supporting and enhancing the education, research, and service activities of the university. However, because the majority of users in medical libraries are interested in current information, it is quite unusual that an academic medical library maintains special and rare book collections. Nevertheless, preserving the history of medicine has an important value as it can give to students and practitioners a new understanding of their medical profession through an ethical, cultural, and social perspective.

Since its beginning in 1993, the University of Rome Campus Bio-Medico Library (UCBML) has worked to achieve these educational goals. For this purpose, the Library curates, preserves, and provides access to rare books and special collections relating to the history of medicine. The presence of these collections fulfills the specific needs of the university, as they contribute to a better understanding of the historical and cultural context of medicine as well as the developments in medical techniques and practices.

The historical collections

UCBML preserves an outstanding historical collection consisting of a main collection of older print books dating from the early 1800s to 1945, and a more modest collection of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century imprints. These non-circulating collections are stored in closed stacks at the Club House, the university's boardroom for business meetings and social events.

The majority of these books are from the collection of Professor Leonardo Donatelli (1911-1992). It comprises over 700 volumes from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, focusing on important works in anatomy, surgery, and pharmacology. Very valuable are the herbals, such as the early seventeenth-century edition of Castore Durante's *Herbario Nuovo*. There are also richly illustrated anatomical textbooks, including a rare 1677 edition of Thomas Bartholin's *Anatomia Bartholiniana*. These treasures open new perspectives for studying past and current medicine, enriching the teaching and learning experience at the university. Because rare books are testimonies of a historical event or activity, handling and reading a medical rare book

Address for correspondence: Campus Bio-Medico University, 21 Via Álvaro del Portillo 00128 Rome, Italy.
E-mail: lo@unicampus.it

represent a unique opportunity for students to gain a deeper understanding of the past of their profession. Another important collection is that bequeathed by Professor Gioan Battista Dell'Acqua (1901-1991), containing around 250 titles of old medical books (*Figure 1*). Contrarily to Leonardo Donatelli collection, Dell'Acqua's library is not recognized as a rare book collection. Yet, this collection is a useful resource for students and researchers who have an interest in the history of medicine. In fact, it reflects the history of scientific publishing companies and the advance of medical and health sciences during the early decades of the twentieth century, thanks to the presence of several textbooks printed by the most notable European publishers of that period, such as Springer-Verlag, Urban & Schwarzenberg, Victor Masson, and Gaston Doin.



Fig. 1. This showcase exhibits a selection of old medical books from the Dell'Acqua collection.

The Himetop collection

For any academic library, it is fundamental to identify ways to increase visibility and awareness of the collections. At UCBML, there is an interesting example of a collaborative project based on the combination of a special collection with a digital resource. This is the *Himetop* – *Historical Medical Topographical Database*, a free access, collaborative on-line database (available at www.himetop.net) launched in 2007 by the Campus

Bio-Medico University. The purpose of this tool is to provide access to photographic and bibliographic documentation about places and material memories related to the history of medicine of local geographical areas. The bibliographical sections of the database contain relevant titles held at UCBML. All these titles are housed in a separate range and treated as a special collection, covering more than 500 books and pamphlets related to sites or objects of medical-historical interest around the world, including old hospitals, monuments, birthplaces, tombs, commemorative plaques, museums, botanical gardens, etc.

Students are directly involved in the creation of new records for the Himetop database. Therefore, the relationship between this free database and the “Himetop” collection offers a positive way to promote outreach and collaboration between library staff, students, and faculty members, increasing the use of UCBML's special collections not only for the university's community, but also for a broader audience of scholars and researchers outside the institution.

The Biography collection

The life and work of figures of the past can be very inspiring, giving the students a sense of encouragement. For this reason, UCBML had built up a sizeable collection of biographical sources of individuals who have contributed to the advancement of medicine and science. A separate shelving location is devoted to this special collection consisting of more than 1,200 titles, many of which are in English. The collection is arranged alphabetically by the subject's name and all titles are classified under one call number of the Dewey Decimal Classification (920). It contains a wide range of sources, including biographies and autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, speeches, papers, epistolary books, obituaries, and biographical dictionaries. Rare and old books are also present in this collection, some of which are very valuable, such as the *Lives of British Physicians*, published in 1830 by the prestigious John Murray.

This biographical collection covers not only great figures and Nobel Prize winners but also lesser-well known people, providing insights into their lives and professional work. In this perspective, the collection has a great relevance in the promotion of the ethical and cultural values of the medical profession. It is a source of inspiration and motivation for students: reading the life of a physician can be very instructive, allowing students

to get an understanding of their future specialty practice through a more humanizing perspective.

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Conclusions

Special collections of medical books have strong research and educational potential as they provide opportunities for new insights into the medical profession. UCBML offers a useful example of how special collections can enhance student's interest in the history of medicine. For example, access to historical medical collections gives a chance to learn about the past through rare books.

However, special collections do not need to contain many rare or valuable materials, but rather they should have some particular attribute. The personal library of Dell'Acqua, for instance, is not a rare book collection as such, but it provides invaluable insights into the socio-historical context of medicine in the twentieth century as it reflects the developments of medical publishing of that period.

The Library holds also special collections built around the history of people, buildings, places, and material memories. In particular, the collection of biographical works about medical and scientific figures is a highly valuable source for the promotion of the social, cultural, and ethical aspects of medicine. Students can find in these stories the moral and cultural foundations necessary to guide them in their future profession.

In conclusion, the Library's special collections offer many stimulating ways to humanize medicine, supporting the Campus Bio-Medico University's educational goals.

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