



Addressing colonial and discriminatory histories in Royal College of Physicians (RCP) collections

Cultural collections are not neutral. The content, language, structures and presentation of these collections have been and are influenced by:

- The people and institutions who collected them
- The people and institutions who preserve them
- The economic, political and societal structures of the places they are held

Societal power structures favour dominant cultural groups and work to maintain existing structures. Collections usually tell stories from the perspectives of these dominant groups. Stories of other groups can be absent or presented in ways that contribute to oppression and/or exploitation.

The RCP's collections and stories, gathered since the organisation's founding in 1518, include many items acquired during Britain's highly exploitative colonial history. The RCP has always been an organisation of well-educated, high-status and frequently wealthy individuals, and until the early 20th century, almost entirely White men. The influences of colonialism, racism, sexism and numerous other discriminatory ways of thinking are embedded in the collections. These existing representations of history have negative impacts on individuals and communities.

Aims

The aim of our work is to uncover hidden and obscured stories in the collections. The aim is not to remove existing interpretations of history, but to show that they do not tell the whole story. This project will review and update information held about items in the collections to ensure that:

- Racist and other inappropriate historical language around colonisation, empire, discriminatory histories, and inappropriate terminology around marginalised communities, is amended or contextualised
- Histories of involvement with enslavement as they relate to donors, contributors, creators and subjects of items in the RCP collections are made clear
- Broader contextual material is provided for collections, to make clear the power structures within which items were created, collected, donated and described

General principles

Staff working with the collections will follow these principles in their work:

- Words matter
Commit to writing documentation and interpretation that is sensitive, accurate, and that avoids perpetuating structural violence and harm
- Discover the whole story
Continue research into discriminatory and 'hidden' histories, to tell stories of underrepresented groups and tell more nuanced versions of already presented stories
- Mind the gap
Recognise that the collections are not representative of all peoples linked to the stories/histories being told. We aim to address and minimise these gaps by future collecting
- The work continues
Commit to expanding and improving the context of the catalogues and interpretive work on a continual basis, based on the actions outlined below and based on user feedback

What is inappropriate language?

Terminology with a derogatory meaning or which perpetuates colonial prejudices, imperialism, mental and physical health stigma, racism, religious intolerance, sexual and gender prejudice, dehumanisation of patients, White supremacy, and White privilege. It includes previously widespread terms which we recognise as offensive or inappropriate. Currently used terminology can also fit within this definition.

The RCP collections contain items relating to topics, ideas and terminology we recognise as discriminatory, with far-reaching impacts that still affect people today (e.g. racism and sexism in medicine; physicians' involvement in slavery; histories of mental health and disability; pseudo-sciences such as eugenics and physiognomy; past medical terminology).

It is important to provide historical accuracy and present a true image of the past. However, past language can have a negative and violent impact on people today. Offensive language should not be used simply to preserve historical realism. It can be exclusionary, triggering or violent to audiences.

What we've done so far

- Added advisory notices to catalogues highlighting inappropriate or offensive language and attitudes
- Revised catalogue descriptions and display text to address inappropriate or offensive language and attitudes, and to add more contextual information
- Investigated the extent to which it is possible to update information on RCP collections held in external locations to reflect changes, e.g. Wellcome Library, the Internet Archive
- Produced a list of [individuals in the collections with connections to the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)
- Produced guidelines to assist staff in writing sensitively and accurately about colonial and discriminatory histories

What we're doing next

- Updating policies to make experiences of under-represented groups a collecting priority
- Continuing to revise catalogue descriptions and display text to address inappropriate or offensive language and attitudes, and to add more contextual information
- Improving finding aids to help people search the catalogues by topic

Future development

This improvement work will be an ongoing project and future activities may include:

- Outreach work to include broader groups in production of collections information
- Interpretation and public programming
- Recruiting individuals with a range of backgrounds to review the work done by RCP staff

How you can get involved

As a team, we are aware that our experiences and cultural backgrounds do not represent the full diversity of society. As such, we welcome input on this ongoing work, from visitors, users, researchers, and anyone else.

Tell us what you think - email us at history@rcp.ac.uk

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