

Who Really Owns the History of Medicine?

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It has been a privilege to be Guest Editor for the first issue of the new online journal *Topics in the History of Medicine* and I wish to thank all those who have been involved, thereby ensuring that this exciting and innovative venture has been and will continue to be successful. Dr Mike Collins and Dr Christopher Gardner-Thorpe have outlined the intentions of this publication in order for it to retain close affinity with the British Society for the History of Medicine. Since its creation in 1965, this particular society continues to promote the subject at the highest standard, which is achieved by acting as a forum for some thirty affiliated societies, museums and libraries each of which has its own distinct area of specialism, as well as a growing number of individual members. The outcome therefore has been a highly successful and respected collaboration that promotes the history of medicine, an extremely challenging subject due to its diversity in relation to chronology, location and professionalism to name just a few of the factors which make a simple definition problematic. Instead, it is a shifting response to progress, which requires curiosity, tenacity and openness from those who research its many facets.

Since my own introduction to the history of medicine some years past, I have remained delighted and reassured by the way in which the subject continues to attract formalised learning among many different institutions, as well as among those who value a more informal engagement with its content. The appeal is not surprising since this is the one aspect of history in general which offers a fascinating and often reassuring insight into the ways in which different aspects of healthcare appear to move forward in order to find the most effective ways of healing the human condition when it is at its most damaged state. The history of medicine can therefore be said to offer reassurance and evidence that progress is being made which help offset those challenges of disease and poor health which affect the individual and societies at large.

However, this positive interpretation hides a more fractious discussion dating back to the mid-twentieth century between members of the medical and allied professions on the one hand and historians on the other as to who is best placed to really understand the subject and interpret it most accurately. The outcome is that the history of medicine is often felt to be a subject which only has any worth when it is left to

those who can be trusted not to offer a simple hagiographic representation of the great and the good, but rather is given over to those who are best placed to understand the representative markers of history, be it social, economic, military or whatever other context is most appropriate.

This is a situation that needs more attention than it receives. It also concerns me from the perspective that it has the potential to make the history of medicine appear remote and unobtainable to those who appear not to have the right credentials to interpret what has gone before, even though they are often part of the world to which much of this history belongs. Therefore if the subject is to continue to progress in ways which it deserves, it must be more of a collaboration between those who are fascinated by the history of medicine, regardless of their academic credentials. It is far more important that there is a unified aim of scholarly excellence as this in turn will achieve the most effective outcome of promoting a subject which has so much content still to be discovered.

For this reason, this new online journal is of immense importance as it is creating an opportunity for research and publication of papers from authors who are from diverse backgrounds yet whose common goal is to share a particular area of interest that will ultimately add to the wider picture which is the history of medicine. The following papers are an example of what can be achieved when initiated by a very personalised interest, while also being presented in a variety of ways, biographical, personal and expanding on existing material through the discussion of new findings. It has been a great pleasure to read each of these submissions not just in relation to the subject matter but also in the way each promotes the value of this new forum which provides a much-needed location to learn from the history of medicine and thereby enjoy what it tells us. It is hoped that collaboratively these papers will encourage submissions by early career researchers from all backgrounds, as well as from history of medicine scholars at different stages of their careers. It is also a fitting development in a society which for so long has welcomed diversity and included all those who wish to be included in this most fascinating of subjects.

Keywords

History of medicine, new journal, scholarly excellence, diverse backgrounds, common goal, collaboration

Biographical Details

Dr Hilary Morris is an established medical historian and author at the Brighton and Sussex Medical School, and Convenor for the DHMSA (Diploma in the History of Medicine of the Society of Apothecaries) in London. She specialises in the development of military and naval preventative health from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and is currently completing funded research on the impact of cholera in former British colonies. She is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal for Medical Biography* and holds a number of trustee appointments including the John Blair Trust. Over the years she has enjoyed membership of many societies promoting the history of medicine and retains a major interest in how the subject can guarantee its relevance for future generations.

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