

Heritage and human remains. A workshop on the challenges of historical and medical research in medical collections and biobanks.

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(provisional abstract) Human biological samples are human remains, and as such, a particular type of object with particular status (a status often depending on where it is located). This workshop will focus on the case of historical medical collections, or tissue collections collected in medical practice. These collections might be identified as (but not limited to) part of a medical museum and thereby as a heritage collection, part of a biological archive for healthcare, or part of a biobank for medical research. Outside the medical community, it may be difficult to answer the question of the acceptability of preserving tissue samples (as human remains) and integrating them into collections. This workshop proposes to take concrete situations into account in order to consider the status of historical medical collections and consider them from medical, historical and social science perspectives.

Medical collections and medical museums are places of heritage and preserve human remains as such. However, the notion of heritage, as a common good to be passed on from one generation to the next, can be contemptuous when speaking of human remains, medical or otherwise. Heritage has been criticised for conveying a universalist viewpoint, where in fact human remains are deeply situated objects. This is particularly true of the controversies surrounding restitutions. Archaeology and ethnography have both discussed (and criticised) the circumstances of why, when, how human remains can be collected, preserved and displayed. These perspectives are notable when evaluating historical collections (especially those containing objects collected over previous decades or centuries). There is a clear contrast between these perspectives and that of the anatomy (or medical) profession for whom human tissues removed from the body are not called human remains, but considered similar to raw material or biowaste.

We aim to identify the key issues or challenges in formulating a model to mobilise historical and/or neglected biological sample collections for current (or future) medical research. This might address, for example, why, when, how human remains collected in a medical context can be preserved and used, as well as questions of circumstances of the sample collection and consent (ie for diagnosis or research or post-mortem), or questions of registries, catalogues and patient data (without which contents of the collection are unidentifiable, but herein lies the paradox of currently anonymising biological samples in medical research).

In this workshop, we will bring together different professions, including biomedical researchers to discuss what historical collections can do that contemporary biobanks cannot and social scientists and medical historians to present the stakes of working with historical human remains. We further aim to have presentations of examples of medical collections or biobanks that have gone through the shift from neglected to registered collections or biobanks. These examples will highlight particular issues faced, in terms of legislation, material contexts or restraints, current use and other specificities or challenges.

By historicising collections, this workshop therefore proposes to develop methodological avenues for contextualising, adding value and working with such collections and archives of human tissues.

Confirmed speakers include :

- Christophe Lamy, M.D., Geneva Hospital, Director of the brain collection at the Belle Idée Hospital, Geneva
- Karin Tyjberg, Curator of medical collections at the Medinisk Museion, Copenhagen
- Henry Alexander Henrysson, Research specialist at the Centre for Ethics, University of Iceland and Member of the Icelandic National Bioethics Committee

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