

## MedHist: the gateway to Internet resources for the history of medicine

David Little

Library Systems Officer, Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine

d.little@wellcome.ac.uk

*MedHist, the history of medicine Internet gateway <<http://medhist.ac.uk>>, aims to provide descriptions of, and links to, hand-picked, high quality Internet resources within the subject area of the history of medicine.*

**MedHist** has been developed by the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine <<http://library.wellcome.ac.uk>>, in cooperation with the BIOME hub <<http://biome.ac.uk>>, a collection of Internet resource discovery services for health and the life sciences which in turn forms part of the UK's Resource Discovery Network (RDN) <<http://www.rdn.ac.uk>>. MedHist, the history of medicine Internet gateway <<http://medhist.ac.uk>>, was launched last July, with the aim of providing descriptions of, and links to, hand-picked, high quality Internet resources within the subject area of the history of medicine.

Before MedHist was launched, there was already some coverage of the subject by other related resource discovery services, such as the OMNI contemporary medical information gateway <<http://omni.ac.uk>> and the Humbul humanities hub <<http://humbul.ac.uk>>. However, the collections of history of medicine resources on these services were small and reflected their primary subject foci; OMNI's resources were aimed at those studying, teaching or practising in the health sciences, while Humbul's resources emphasised the humanistic aspects of the subject. It was felt that there was a need for a dedicated history of medicine gateway as the subject itself has become an academic discipline in its own right, rather than an adjunct to medical education or an esoteric branch of historical research. Additionally, the growing number of available Web sites relating to the history of medicine suggested the need for a service which could provide pointers to quality-assessed, reliable resources. While it was

possible for the medical historian to locate resources using existing search engines, search engines themselves can give no assurance as to the quality of the resource, or indeed its relevance.

### Building the resource catalogue

MedHist collects resources relating to the history of medicine in its social, cultural and scientific contexts. The range of subjects covered is therefore broad and reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the history of medicine. MedHist collects resources in the following areas:

- History of medicine and disease
- History of all medical and allied professions
- Genealogy and biography, where there is a specific emphasis on people involved in medicine or the medical and allied professions
- Social history, where the primary emphasis is on living conditions, health and welfare
- Anthropology, where the primary emphasis is on beliefs and practices relating to health, welfare and medicine
- History of science, where there is sufficient reference to medicine and related fields

The MedHist user will come across resources relating from anything to a history of ultrasound in obstetrics <<http://www.ob-ultrasound.net/history.html>> to sites dealing with

magic or witchcraft (e.g. <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/salem/>>). Resource formats are also various: MedHist links to electronic versions of historic texts, databases, electronic journals, library catalogues, electronic discussion lists and online exhibitions, to name but a few. Clicking on the heading 'Electronic publications' on the MedHist home page will provide a full listing of the types of resources indexed.

The process of resource discovery involved using a number of different sources to locate relevant sites, including discussion lists, search engines and existing gateways. Serendipity also played a role, as links from some resources led to other relevant resources. At the time of writing, MedHist's resource catalogue contained almost 780 descriptions of history of medicine resources.

Evaluating history of medicine resources posed its own problems. Whilst some evaluation criteria are applicable whatever the subject area (e.g. authority, accuracy, coverage, etc.), the ways of establishing them are not always the same. The other BIOME gateways place emphasis on assessing the evidence base of resources, which is obviously not relevant to more historical resources. Indeed, by their very nature, many of the resources on MedHist contains references to outdated and disproved medical theories or practices. Also, currency of information may be less of a key evaluation consideration for historical resources which may enjoy greater longevity than contemporary medical information sources.

Therefore, a new set of evaluation criteria had to be drawn up which, whilst referring to the BIOME

guidelines, contained information specific to historical resources. MedHist's evaluation guidelines can be found at <http://medhist.ac.uk/about/evaluation/>.

## Using MedHist

MedHist can be either browsed or searched. Users may browse by broad subject categories from the MedHist home page, or they may click on the more technical MeSH terms (Medical Subject Headings) that are assigned to each resource description and which act as pathfinders to other similar resources. MedHist may also be browsed by time period, using a time-line function <http://medhist.ac.uk/timeline.html>. A powerful search engine allows users to search the entire database or limit by type of resource or time coverage.

MedHist resource descriptions consist of a title, hyperlink to the resource in question and a brief descriptive paragraph outlining the main features of the resource, its subject coverage and details of who has created it and its purpose. The description allows cataloguers to express evaluative judgements about the resource which can help users decide if the resource is relevant to them. Additionally, resource descriptions contain searchable keywords which may include historical names for ailments which cannot be expressed when assigning keywords from the MeSH thesaurus.

In addition to the use of MeSH terms to subject index resources, personal name headings are also assigned to resources where that resource is particularly related to an individual or individuals, or if it is an electronic version of a historical text. These personal name headings are clickable, and allow the user to identify other resources by or about that individual. A variety of personal names are indexed on MedHist, covering figures from antiquity to the present day. As an example, there are 22 resources relating to Hippocrates, 13 to Charles Darwin, and three each to Francis Crick and James Watson.

## Managing MedHist

MedHist continues to be maintained and developed by staff at the Wellcome Library. Additionally, an external cataloguer based at the UK Centre for the History of Nursing at Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, is adding to MedHist's resource catalogue in the area of the history of nursing. Distributed cataloguing arrangements are being considered as a way of encouraging community involvement in building MedHist.

## Evaluation and future developments

The Wellcome Library has just finished an evaluation of MedHist, the results of which are available to read on the MedHist Web site <http://medhist.ac.uk/evaluation/>. This survey analysed usage of MedHist by examining logs of Web page requests and search logs. MedHist users were also encouraged to fill in an online questionnaire asking them about their usage of the service and their thoughts on it. The evaluation survey has proved to be a useful process and allowed MedHist's staff to identify priorities for developments to the service. The evaluation highlighted a number of interesting facts:

- Usage of MedHist has continued to grow since its launch in July 2003, with a few minor fluctuations. On average, MedHist receives 45,609 visits per month
- Over 60% of searches on MedHist returned relevant results
- The majority of MedHist's users come from the UK higher education sector
- MedHist's principal user group were librarians who used the service to support reference enquiries

Respondents on the whole were very positive about the service. The most common complaint was that more resources were needed. The main priority therefore, is for MedHist staff is to keep adding to

the resource catalogue. However, there are also other development plans for MedHist which will, it is hoped, also benefit the history of medicine community.

Recently launched is the MedHist events database. This gives users access to a browsable listing of conferences, lectures, seminars and other events relating to the history of medicine. Users can also submit details of events they have planned.

It is also hoped to widen access to MedHist's resource description records. At present, resource descriptions can be accessed via the MedHist Web site and also the RDN's Web site. Resource records will also be available via the Humbul Humanities Hub Web site, exposing them to humanities researchers for whom MedHist may not be an obvious finding aid, but who may find some of the resources on MedHist relevant to their research. As a reciprocal agreement, MedHist provides access to a number of Humbul's History and Philosophy of Science resource description records which allows MedHist users access to contextual information about developments in the history of science. Within the Wellcome Library itself, it is hoped to make MedHist interoperable with the library's other electronic finding aids and catalogues, allowing users to search seamlessly for a variety of different media via a central access point.

## Latest NeLH news

### Keep up-to-date with the latest NeLH news

Bookmark *NeLH Update*, the monthly newsletter from the NeLH, or even better subscribe and get the latest newsletter delivered straight to your mailbox.

Sign up at <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/up>