The Wellcome Museum of the History of Medicine

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In the mid-1970s there was gloom and despondency in the museum world when rumours abounded that the Wellcome Museum of Medicine in the Euston Road, London, was to close and its contents were to be dispersed. At a time when more and more of our national treasures were coming under the hammer it was feared that yet another part of our national heritage would be lost for ever. It was with a sense of relief and pleasure that we were informed that the Science Museum in South Kensington where two galleries on the fourth and fifth floors would be made available to house a new Wellcome Museum supported by a grant of £650000 from the Wellcome Trustees towards the cost of conservation and cataloguing. The Wellcome Library remains in the Euston Road premises.

The original collection was formed by Henry (later Sir Henry) Solomon Wellcome, F.R.S. (1853–1936), who was a pioneer of tabletted medicines and became sole proprietor of Burroughs Wellcome and Co. in 1895. He spent much of the firm’s profits to create a museum to illustrate man’s history in relation to health and medicine but his grand plan only came to fruition after his death. The collection, first displayed in one of the tall elegant houses in Wigmore Street, is truly incredible with more than 1600 microscopes dating from the 17th Century, 10000 microscopes slides, more than 40000 surgical instruments dating back to Roman times, 10000 specimens of materia medica, 7000 coins and medals of medical interest ranging from early civilized man to the present, several thousand spectacles, a vast collection of pharmaceutical ceramics and glass and hundreds of manufacturers catalogues and other medical items; the total now easily exceeds 125000 objects. The whole collection will be catalogued on computer to facilitate future research.

The present museum displays a representative blend of this collection together with more recently acquired items designed to bring the exhibition completely up to date. If space was a problem in the Euston Road site it certainly is not now with ingenuity, proportion of the whole in the 1400m2 available. The first impression of the new gallery is of an overwhelming amount of material and in one visit it is possible only to wander round gathering a general impression and earmarking sections for more detailed attention on another occasion. The presentation aims to appeal both to the layman and the professional wishing to expand his knowledge of general or specialized areas of medicine and dentistry.

The early history makes full use of the original collection with medical progress revealed by a series of scenes, some as full-scale reconstructions. For those with an interest in medical artifacts there are some fascinating items such as an amulet of a pregnant hippopotamus worn by ancient Egyptian women to give protection in childbirth, the cast of a lavatory seat c. 1370 BC, George Washington’s false teeth and the Emperor Napoleon’s toothbrush, not to mention a display of genuinely shrunken human heads as well as outstanding examples of the more usual collector’s items such as drug jars and pill tiles.

The lower gallery, called ‘Glimpses of Medical History’, was opened to the public in 1980 and creates, as a series of scenes, how it might have felt to have been a patient or a doctor at different times and in various places in the world. These range from an early stone age trepanning operation (to release undesirable demons from the head?) to life-sized reconstructions of an intensive care unit and a heart transplant operation. The scientific involvement is indicated by Lister’s use of antiseptic sprays and by the re-creation of a 1950s microbiological laboratory, inadvertently showing practices that would make a Health and Safety at Work Inspector recoil in horror!

The new upper gallery, opened by H.R.H. Princess Alexander last December, contains 537 display units devoted to ‘The Science and Art of Medicine’. As a compression of, perhaps too much, information into a relatively small space it is an impressive achievement; unfortunately it is less than a complete success. Much of the material is not well suited to the modern trend of display with dramatic overhead lighting in a surrounding of deep gloom. The result is that it is frequently impossible to make out the detail on objects on the lower shelves as they sit in the heavy shadows cast by those on the shelves above.

The gallery is divided into 22 areas, of which eight deal with the 20th Century and contain some nice demonstrations of modern equipment. Particularly impressive is a working heart-beat monitor which, at the push of a button, makes it possible to compare the oscilloscope trace of a normal heartbeat with those for various degrees of arhythmia.

From a biochemical viewpoint the museum is a great disappointment. Apart from brief allusions to early developments in medicine the only real attempt to represent the biochemical involvement is in the area entitled Laboratory Medicine. This does justice to the early pioneers of chemotherapy—Ehrlich, Pasteur and Keck—to Sahachiro Hata’s discovery of Salvarsan for the treatment of syphilis, and to other major discoveries such as sulphonamides, antibiotics, contraceptive hormones, tranquilizers and, inevitably, thalidomide. Bacteriology enables some of the vast collection of microscopes to be displayed and modern microbial screening kits get their due, albeit briefly, as does immunology and the development of vaccines. Treatment of the historical development of the clinical chemistry laboratory is, however, derisory. Spectrophotometry is represented only by the Lovibond colorimeter, and electrophoresis and paper chromatography are given only the briefest of mentions. There is no reference to such basic essentials as flame photometry and the more recent use of atomic absorption, or even centrifugation and pH measurement (Burroughs Wellcome and Co. actually prepared standard buffer tablets especially for use with pH meters made by the Cambridge Instrument Co. Ltd.), nor to the development of automation from the spaghetti-laced Technicon onwards. In striking contrast there are displays for gel filtration and the ELISA test for Germans measles—a tribute, one suspects, more to the enterprise of the firms concerned than any attempt to portray how a clinical chemistry laboratory works. Of other aspects of biochemical involvement in medicine, either by way of explaining hereditary or metabolic diseases or for diagnostic purposes, there is no mention. In his day Sir Henry would have provided the raw materials for such investigations, just as his Trust supports them financially today. Somehow it is hard to believe that he would have approved of this corner of the museum.

On the way out an attractive display of medals seems to relate...
to all disciplines except biochemistry. It is an interesting thought that, although much of our Society's early work is founded in medical advance, not one of our many medals is devoted to this subject. Maybe the Society has missed an opportunity here?

Bearing in mind the timescale of the preparation it must be concluded that this museum, representing the largest and most comprehensive display devoted to the history of medicine anywhere in the world, is an impressive achievement, even though some aspects both of general presentation and subject matter leave plenty of challenge for the future. Both in terms of general interest and specialist research the nation has much to be grateful for to that far-sighted chemical tycoon, its founder, and to those who, unsung, have ensured its continuity for the foreseeable future.

As you seek the tea-bar, which you will assuredly need (incidentally, it closes at 4.55 p.m. and there is nothing stronger on the premises) make your way past the Chemistry gallery where rest the early tools of the molecular biologists, not least among which is the now very 'grotty' first plasticine model of haemoglobin that ushered in a new era of biochemical achievement and so excited our older generation of biochemists. Finally, gaze with awe on the massive construction of the original Svedberg ultracentrifuge installed in the Lister Institute in 1936. We certainly have it soft nowadays!