

# The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh's 300-year relationship with print on paper

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## SUMMARY

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It is very likely that digital resources will be the primary source materials of the historians of the future. After 550 years, printing on paper is no longer the only means of information transfer. This paper summarises some of the new ways of digitally disseminating medical information before using the example of a Scottish professional society to show the importance of that extraordinarily successful method of information transfer - printing on paper using movable types. The paper aims to show how a seemingly simple, comparatively low technology, process has driven a lot of the decisions of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and provided a reliable means to document those decisions for over 300 years.

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## RESUME

Il est fort probable que les sources principales des historiens dans le futur seront en forme de ressources digitales. Apres plus de cinq cents ans, l'imprimerie n'est plus la seule facon de transmettre les informations. Cet article presente un resume des techniques nouvelles par lesquelles la dissemination des informations medicales sont transmises avant de montrer comment une societe professionnelle Ecossoise a eut une reussite remarquable en disseminant les informations, en utilisant les techniques permettant la reproduction d'une texte par impression de caracteres sur papier. Cet article cherche a nous montrer comment, ce moyen apparemment simple et d'une technologie non compliquee avait influence plusieurs decisions du Royal College of Physicians d'Edimbourg et fut le moyen dont elles ont ete documente pour la plupart de trois cents ans.

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## THE DIGITAL PRESENT

Communication methods change. The telegraph and telephone led to a decline in letter writing. The rise of email and text messaging has meant that communication through writing is popular again. In 2002 some would say that, as a means of information transfer, printed books are anachronistic. It is certainly true that other ways to disseminate medical information are well established. And because medicine has always been bibliographically well served it was well placed to take advantage of the remarkable changes in information transfer in the last 20 years as the computer revolutionised the dissemination of knowledge. The printed *Index Medicus* started in 1879, its computerised descendant - the National Library of Medicine's *Medline* database now contains references to 12 million journal articles, many have abstracts and an increasing number are linked to the full text of the 4000 medical journals indexed. *Medline* is up to date and (thanks to the United States Government) it is universally and freely available to anyone in the world who has access to an Internet connected computer. The computer doesn't even need to be static as laptop or palmtop computers can be used to log on to the database.

In 2002 anyone with access to a computer can access an enormous amount of information. This is a

revolutionary period and it can be difficult to imagine how knowledge was disseminated internationally before the widespread use of computers. However computers are not perfect. Their drawbacks include - their reliance on electrical energy, their complexity, they suffer from the frequent connectivity difficulties and they are fragile.

The digital products of computers differ from analogue media as they are not inextricably bound to their containers. So preserving them is not necessarily a matter of preserving their containers as it is in the analogue world. With digital data, a machine needs to be between the data and its human interpreter, which adds another layer of complication.

Digital information is at risk because it is recorded on a transient medium, in a specified file format, and it needs a transient coding scheme (a programming language) to interpret it. The sheer number of digital documents is also a large problem. Digital documents may seem easy to store, back up and restore but they can be very difficult to find on a hard drive, particularly when the document's title has been forgotten. Their sheer number is also a disadvantage, it can be tempting to keep so much that the costs and problems of data organisation render an archive virtually useless. This problem is magnified by the huge issues connected with the preservation problems associated with the ever-changing information available on the Internet.

### THE PRODUCT OF AN EARLIER TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

The printed book shares some of the drawbacks listed in the previous paragraph. However it is instructive to speculate on what features of printing on paper with movable types, public relations advisers and advertising agents would be enthusiastically advocating if printing was the new technology. They might point out that books are sturdy, have no power requirements and the information contained within a book's durable covers/containers can be accessed easily from the index at the back. They might also point out that although printed documents can be highly complex objects their structure does not need to be understood for their preservation, only for their interpretation. It is also evident that books can be subject specific, are easily transportable and have a long life.

Books printed on good quality, acid free paper can certainly last. The earliest printed book in the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh Library is Benvenuto Grassi's *De Oculis*. (1) Written in the Middle Ages this work was regarded as the classic text on cataract operations for over 500 years. The College's copy was published in Italy in 1474 - when James III was on the Scottish throne, Edward the 4th was the English king and Caxton had just printed the first book in England.

The Internet's international coverage is also not new. A very representative example of the sort of easily transportable knowledge source you can find in the College Library is a book, published in 1579, containing two works. The book was printed in Antwerp on one of the 20 presses owned by the great publisher, printer and bookbinder Christopher Plantin. Plantin's printing business (at the sign of The Golden Compass) was the most successful of the time. He took great care with the production of his publications, which often contained many good quality illustrations. Plantin published a wide range of material including a multi-lingual Bible and a vast array of scientific and medical books including works by Vesalius and Valverde. The first work within the volume's vellum cover is the first textbook on tropical medicine *Aromatum Simplicium*. (2) It was written by Garcia da Orta, a Portuguese physician, who practised in Lisbon before moving to Goa where he started a botanical garden. Da Orta's book contains the first European account of the Indian materia medica as well as an early account of cholera. Nicolas Monardes wrote the second work *Simplicium Medicamentorum*. (3) Monardes, who graduated in medicine at Seville, was probably the most successful, sixteenth century, Spanish physician. His works were translated into Latin, Italian, French, Flemish, German, and English. Monardes' volume contains an enthusiastic advocacy of *tobacco*, which he recommends as a treatment for toothache and carbuncles and as an

antidote for some types of poison. So today, existing in 21st century Edinburgh, there is a volume which was published in 1579, by a Dutchman in Antwerp containing the work of a Portuguese doctor writing in Goa about an Indian subject. It also contains the writings of a Spanish doctor on an American plant. And thanks to the clues on the title page it is known that a Scot bought it in Paris.

The story of how this book got to the College in Edinburgh illustrates the transportability of the medium. The first record of a book purchase in the College Minutes is in 1705 when the College bought the library of the deceased Laird of Livingstone for 300 merks Scots. (4) The Laird of Livingstone (Patrick Moray) had died while buying books and visiting botanical gardens in Europe. Sir Robert Sibbald, the founder of both the College and its Library was a great friend of Moray and he may have been instrumental in buying Moray's books for the College. In 2002 Moray's books are dispersed throughout the library but they can still be identified by the signed title pages on which Moray also noted the date and place of purchase. Although the book was bought 126 years after it was published it was almost certainly not an antiquarian purchase - knowledge still had a long shelf life in the 17th century. The travels of Monardes and Da Orta's book did not end once the book had crossed the sea and arrived in Edinburgh to join the growing library of the College Fellows. Earlier in this paper some of the advantages of books compared to digital devices were listed. However printed books do have disadvantages which include the major problems associated with transporting them and the even bigger difficulties connected with storing them.

### THE COLLEGE STORES THE PRINTED BOOK

On the 29th September 1696, 9 Fellows gathered to hold one of the 19 meetings that the Royal College of Physicians held that year. The College had started in 1681 to raise standards and from its inception used books as a means to achieve this. The importance the College placed on books can be discovered from the minutes "On this day it was agreed to minute the instruction that every Intransigent be required to present a book- one or more as they please to the College library"(5)

During its early years the Fellows of the newly formed College did not have premises to meet in so the College meetings were held initially in the homes of the founding fellows. Presumably the College's books travelled with the Fellows and, like their owners, did not have a permanent home. The 1701 minutes certainly reveal that expenses were incurred in repairing the "presses" for the books damaged by fire and the transporting of books.(6) The College's wanderings ended when they

first rented a room before buying their first property in Fountain Close off Edinburgh's then fashionable Cowgate in December 1704.

By 1766 the growing library (well over 2000 titles) was outstripping its deteriorating accommodation. The Fellows debated what to do. Should they repair Fountain Close or move to a new site? The collapse of the Fountain Close Hall's roof concentrated minds. The books were hastily transferred to a room in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, which was close by in High School Wynd. College meetings were then held in various places. It was during this period of wandering in the middle of the 18th century that some of the most precious botanical books arrived in the collection. In March 1768, an Honorary Fellow of the College, the first Scottish born, British Prime Minister, John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute wrote to the College asking whether the books he had sent by carrier had arrived. The College President, Sir Stuart Thriepland replied almost 2 months after Bute's original letter.

*"By particular desire of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, I beg leave to trouble your Lordship with their most grateful acknowledgements for the elegant and genteel present of Books, you have been pleased to honour us with; they are both useful and ornamental to our Library..... The College thought it improper to interrupt your Lordship's attention from affairs of greater moment by intimating the arrival of each volume. The whole Books shall have, and most deservedly, a proper place in the Library or Hall, which the Physicians are about to build and which they intend to make as genteel and elegant a piece of Architecture as the College funds will permit" (7)*

The books remained in the Royal Infirmary for fifteen years until when they were moved to James Craig's purpose built George Street Hall. Unfortunately the principal apartment designed to hold the books was not ready for another eight years. It seems that the great cost of the exterior of the building had exhausted the College's finances. Cost cutting measures had only limited success and the College's finances did not improve until 1842 when they accepted the Commercial Bank's offer to buy the George Street premises. The books were on the move again - this time to the West End of George Street where temporary accommodation was found at number 19. The College then bought No 9 Queen Street. Once the site was cleared their architect, Thomas Hamilton started building what they hoped would be more practical premises featuring lots of room for books. The Queen Street Hall was completed in 1846 and the book-space did last almost thirty years until 1875 when a "New Library" designed by David Bryce was opened to hold the expanding collection.

## CONCLUSION

The College's experience shows that printed works and their appetite for storage space can drive organisational decision-making. And it is not just space for formally published documents. The Patrick Moray example and the communication between Lord Bute and Sir Stuart Thriepland show that details preserved in communications (by accident or design) reveal much about the past. There are of course ways that new technology can be used to preserve the past. For instance, the College use the medium of digital video to do this and since 1995 video interviews have been used to capture the recollections of 29 Fellows. Information about this and other initiatives can be found on the College website. (8)

In 2002 The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh contains a remarkable record of medical knowledge printed using movable types on printed paper. Printed books, which many take for granted, have driven many of the policies of the College. The information within them was crucial to the Fellows as a professional body. The storage of them has had a major influence on the College's current buildings and on the College's previous homes.

The printed book is unlikely to drive College policy to such an extent ever again but it does remain a resource to be preserved and exploited and today's digital technology can be used to contribute to this.

## References

1. Grass, Benvenuti. *De oculis eorumque aegritudinibus et curis*, Ferrara, 1474.
2. Da Orta, Garcia. *Aromatum, et simplicium aliquot medicamentorum apud Indos nascentium historia*, Christopher Plantin, Antwerp, 1574.
3. Monardes, Nicolas. *De simplicibus medicamentis es Occidental! India delatis, quorum in medicina usus est*, Christopher Plantin, Antwerp, 1574.
4. *College Minutes*, 8, XI, 1696.
5. *College Minutes*, 29, IX, 1696.
6. *College Minutes*, 16, VI, 1701.
7. Stuart Thriepland to Earl of Bute, draft letter, *College General Correspondence*, May 4 1768.
8. <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/index.html>

## Illustrations

1. Title-page from Da Orta, Garcia. *Aromatum, et simplicium aliquot medicamentorum apud Indos nascentium historia*, Christopher Plantin, Antwerp, 1574.
2. Title-page from Monardes, Nicolas. *De simplicibus medicamentis es Occidental! India delatis, quorum in medicina usus est*, Christopher Plantin, Antwerp, 1574.