Position Title: Research and display development, ‘Hydrocephalus’ skeleton

Supervisor: Dr Ryan Jefferies, Curator, HBA Museum
Helen Arnoldi, Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator

Position Goal: The primary goal of this position will be to investigate the origins of a ‘Hydrocephalus’ skeleton held in the HBA collection about which little is known. The project will also involve the writing of a text panel for the display of the specimen within the Museum, detailing its historical context and current knowledge of this disease. The completed research will increase our understanding and appreciation of the skeleton and provide a broader context in which it can be understood.

Background: The Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology has one of the largest collections of anatomical and pathological specimens and teaching models in Australia and serves as an educational facility for students studying medicine and related science disciplines. A majority of the 12,000 objects within the collection are dissected human remains (organs, systems or regions), some of which date back to the time of Sir Harry Brookes Allen (June 1854 – March 1926). Most of the museum is arranged according to anatomical regions and systems of the human body, with corresponding pathologies. The Harry Brookes Allen Museum’s collection also includes a significant collection of historical plaster, papier-mâché and wax anatomical models imported from Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, historical death masks and a wax dermatological moulage collection.

The HBA Museum collections include multiple examples of rare pathologies of the skeleton and many of these are historical specimens that date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. This project will investigate the origins of an historic example of ‘Hydrocephalus’, a disorder involving the abnormal accumulation of cerebral spinal fluid within the brain.

Responsibilities: In consultation with the Curator, the student/volunteer will investigate the provenance of this historic example of Hydrocephalus that is part of the collection. The skeleton most likely dates back to the 1800s, and very little is known about its origins and how it came to be part of the HBA collections. The research component of this project will involve searching historical museum catalogues, archival documents in the University of Melbourne Archives and other resources to identify provenance details. This completed research will then be used as the foundation to write a text panel for the display of this skeleton within the Museum. The extended panel will detail its historical context as well as current knowledge about the disease. If interested, there may also be the opportunity to develop this research into an article for future publication.
Qualifications: The student/volunteer will need to have sound research skills and be competent in use of the library and its catalogues.

Knowledge of the correct procedures for the safe handling of museum objects is desirable as this position will require the close inspection of these vulnerable objects.

Good communication skills are needed including research writing and interactions with research contacts. Ability to work independently on research leads.

A science background and an interest in medical history would be ideal.

Training and Supervision: On-the-job training specific to the task of this position will be provided.

Occasional meetings with the Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator to review how the project is progressing and discuss any ideas or problems encountered.

Benefits: Opportunity to work at close hand with one of the University of Melbourne’s extensive cultural collections.

The opportunity for professional development through experience gained in collection management procedures and practice.

Satisfaction gained from the creation of new knowledge about this unique collection item, and contributing to its interpretation via the creation of an extended text panel for display in the museum. In depth research into the University’s cultural collections is necessary to enhance our long term understanding, management and appreciation of the collections.

For more information on this position please contact:
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