

Preparatory Tools

Approaching museums of medicine

Introduction

The Hunterian Museum contains many extraordinary objects that can provoke strong reactions. It is important to be aware that some students in the class may have particular sensitivities to the displays. The museum contains preserved human and animal remains showing general anatomy as well as diseases. Some individuals may have a medical condition similar to those presented or have a relative who is affected. Groups will need preparation and should feel able to talk about their reactions. These activities suggest different ways of looking at medical artefacts and make links with student's experiences and values. It also provides a background to thinking about the human body and medicine as visual spectacle and entertainment.





Classroom Activity

Why would you look at that?

Introduction

This activity helps place medical museums in a wider context. It helps students explore the concept of a collection of specimens and their reactions to it.



Steps

Part 1: Opening up the discussion

Ask:

- Have you ever visited a medical museum?
- What would you expect to see there?
- What do you think museums of medicine are for?

Part 2: Looking at specimens

1. Show the photograph on page 3.
2. Ask :
 - What is your first reaction? How do you feel?
 - What do you think these specimens are?
3. Explain that the picture shows a cabinet from the Crystal Gallery at the Hunterian Museum and show specimens relating to the gestation of birds, including bird embryos at various stages of development.
4. Ask:
 - Now you know what you are looking at, do you feel differently?
 - Do you think human specimens would be harder to look at? Why?

Part 3: Are medical artefacts beautiful?

1. Show the picture of the Crystal Gallery on page 4. Explain the gallery houses over 3,000 specimens.

2. Ask students:

- Do you think these could be valued as beautiful objects?
- Is 'beautiful' an odd word to describe these displays?
- How else can they be described? (Clinical, clean looking, gruesome, intriguing?)

Part 4: Building a Taxonomy

1. Ask:
 - How are these specimens grouped?
 - What do they have in common?
2. Explain that the arrangements in the Crystal Gallery are based on Hunter's own classification. He grouped together parts of the body like skulls, hearts or specimens showing the same disease.
3. Ask:
 - How would you organise a collection of medical specimens? Why?





The Crystal Gallery



Classroom Activity

Do you have the stomach for it?

Introduction

Entering the medical professions requires the ability to approach the body and its components without squeamishness. This activity explores the various reactions people have to surgical matters and can help prepare students for a visit to the Hunterian Museum.



Steps

Part 1: The operating theatre

1. Explain that as well as specimens dating from the 18th Century, the Hunterian Museum also displays current surgery practice including film clips from real operations which demonstrate the use of instruments, how the surgery team work together and the effects of surgery on the patient.
2. Ask students:
 - Have you had an operation?
 - How would you feel if it was being filmed?
 - Would you watch it if you had the chance to?
 - Would you feel differently watching a video of a real operation to looking at specimens in jars? Why?

Part 2: Are you squeamish?

1. Explore the different ways people view medical matters. Examples include:
 - John Hunter, who spent hours before breakfast each morning dissecting and preparing specimens with his students.
 - People who enjoy watching medical dramas like Casualty and ER. Although these are actors, the effects and make-up can be realistic.

- People who find they can't look at anything 'gory'. It can even make some people faint.
2. Ask students to discuss briefly in pairs or small groups how they react. Questions they can ask each other include:
 - How do you feel looking at medical specimens or anything 'gory'?
 - Can you stand the sight of blood?
 - Do you enjoy medical dramas?
 3. Get groups to feedback to the class.
 4. Now ask 'what reasons might someone have for looking at medical specimens?' Possible prompts:
 - to learn more about medicine
 - to draw as objects of beauty
 - out of curiosity
 - as a form of entertainment

Extension

In the past patients were sometimes operated on with crowds of medical students watching. Patients would endure an audience because they received medical treatment from the best surgeons in the land. Today surgery is not such a 'show' and usually witnessed by a select few students.

Ask students:

- Can the performance of surgery been seen as entertainment?
- Why do people choose to watch live surgery on TV?



Classroom Activity 'Cabinets of Curiosity'

Introduction

In the 16th and 17th centuries people were fascinated with natural oddities and collected the most bizarre or unusual specimens, displaying their collections in 'cabinets of curiosity'. The Hunterian collection is not considered a cabinet of curiosity as the specimens were used for medical research and teaching.



Steps

1. Explain that during the 16th and 17th centuries some people collected anatomical models and preparations of human remains. Also that:
 - these were valued as beautiful objects.
 - there would often be a symbolic theme to the collection such as 'stages in life'
 - collections were intended to stimulate conversation.
2. Ask students if any of them have collections. For those that do ask:
 - why do you collect?
 - do you like the way these items look?
 - do you find them interesting?
 - do you collect things that are strange or familiar?
3. Now ask all students to consider what they would put in their own cabinet of curiosity. Get them to sketch or describe it:
 - how big or small is it?
 - where would it go?
 - who could see it?
 - would anything be hidden away from the eyes of others?



Museum Activity Medical Museums in London

Introduction

The Hunterian Museum belongs to the London Museums of Health and Medicine Group. For details on all medical museums in London, please visit www.medicalmuseums.org. Some of the museums are listed here.



Alexander Fleming Laboratory Museum

Learn the secrets of the laboratory in which Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928. An in-situ reconstruction of the laboratory, displays and a video uncover the remarkable story of how a chance discovery became a lifesaving drug destined to revolutionise medicine. Small admission charge.

St Mary's Hospital, Praed St, W2 1NY. Tel: 020 7886 6528. www.st-marys.nhs.uk/fleming_museum.html

The Chelsea Physic Garden

The Chelsea Physic Garden was founded by the Society of Apothecaries in 1673 to promote the study of botany in relation to medicine, then known as the "physic" or "healing" arts. As the second oldest botanic garden in England it still fulfils the traditional functions of scientific research and plant conservation. School visits for all Key Stages can be arranged to suit the topics of your choice.

66 Royal Hospital Rd, SW3 4HS. Tel: 00 7352 5646 www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk

Old Operating Theatre, Museum and Herb Garret

The 300-year old herb garret houses the only surviving 19th century operating theatre, complete with wooden operating table and observation stands, from which spectators witnessed surgery performed without anesthesia or antiseptics. Charge for entry.

9a St Thomas's St, SE1 9RY. Tel: 020 7188 2679. www.thegarret.org.uk

Science Museum

The Science Museum's medical collections have a global scope and coverage. Four major galleries display the history of medicine from the earliest times, with a strong emphasis on 20th century medicine and contemporary issues of biological identity. Charge for some aspects.

Exhibition Rd, South Kensington, SW7 2DD. Tel: 020 7942 4455. www.sciencemuseum.org.uk