The Hennigar Pathology Museum at the Medical University of South Carolina attracts students interested in seeing specimens collected during autopsies and operations

Restored pathology museum gets both 'ews' and awe

Julia Duda | MUSC News Center | April 14, 2015

Photos by Sarah Pack

Dr. Christine Papadea shows thyroid specimens to students from the Orangeburg High School for Health Professions during their tour of the Pathology Museum at MUSC.

Tucked away in room 108 of the Walton Research Building lies a hidden gem that some consider one of MUSC’s best-kept secrets. But after a 4-year restoration and digitization project in collaboration with the Waring Historical Library, the Gordon R. Hennigar Pathology Museum and its 890 wet specimens are no longer a secret.

Inside the museum, a group of high school students gathers around Christine Papadea, Ph.D.,
currently professor emerita and caretaker of the museum. She draws their attention to a lacerated liver suspended in an acrylic container filled with formaldehyde. “Now that’s cool,” one mesmerized student says. A group of female students exchange “yucks” and “ews” while examining intestines infested by a parasitic roundworm. Other students check out a gunshot-wounded lung and a fatty liver caused by alcoholism.

Orangeburg High School for Health Professions students Lauryn Bryan, Madison Irick and Chandlar Glover got a "Glimpse of Medicine" tour.

One reason students are able to see the museum’s expansive collection is in part due to the work of Papadea, who has put together one of the campus’ best tours.

The museum is an elective tour through the College of Medicine’s “A Glimpse of Medicine” program, which attracts groups of high school students every month. Nickolas Sumpter, a science teacher at the Orangeburg County School District 5 High School for Health Professions, takes his students to MUSC for field trips every year.

“We have students who do want to go into the science field but they’re not really exposed to certain things. With us taking these trips we expose them to thinking outside the box and we challenge them,” Sumpter said.

This month, Sumpter and his class visited the restored pathology museum for the first time. Students got the opportunity to hear from Papadea and roam through the museum, specimen roster in hand.

The museum got its start in 1914, when MUSC’s first pathologist, Kenneth Lynch, M.D., started collecting specimens to educate medical students. All of the specimens were either collected at autopsy, or in some cases, surgery. The collection enables students to visually learn about human pathology – the study of disease – and the causes and effects of diseases.

Gordon R. Hennigar, M.D. took over the collection in 1965 and continued its expansion until 1988. Philip Turner was caretaker for the museum until his retirement from the position in 2003. Papadea, who was a professor and director of the clinical chemistry lab at MUSC for 20 years, became caretaker of the museum in 2010, several years after her retirement.

Susan Hoffius, curator of the Waring Historical Library, and S. Erin Presnell, M.D., director of medical and forensic autopsy, tasked Papadea with restoring the pathology museum specimens because of her chemistry background.

“We wanted to record the information before it was completely lost, and then as a happy byproduct, we started having students coming in and looking at the specimens themselves,” Presnell said.

In September of 2010, Papadea made herself comfortable in Room 108 in the Walton Research building, where she volunteered 15 hours a week for four years. Before her work was officially completed in 2014, she started giving tours to high school students in 2012.
The museum's specimens help teach students what healthy and diseased organs look like.

Restoring some of the damaged and neglected specimen containers was just one part of the collaborative project between the Waring Historical Library and the MUSC Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (DPLM). The specimens themselves were preserved and digitized.

DPLM photographer Jim Nicholson photographed the entire collection, which is currently available on MUSC’s online database, MEDICA. Using the digital library’s “Zoomify” tool, medical students can examine and study the 1,738 specimen images in great detail.

“Together it was a project that has worked out really well and has both increased the access to the collection, because now people can utilize it online, but also its extended the life of the individual specimens because they needed the care and attention that Christine was able to give to them,” Hoffius said.

For Papadea, there is always work to be done in the museum, whether it's patching leaky containers or monitoring fluid levels or prepping for student tours.

“It was a great project for me, and very rewarding. Dealing with this many specimens, it was labor of love because I knew the value and significance of the collection.”

To visit or inquire about the Gordon R. Hennigar Pathology Museum, Room RS108, please contact Dr. Evelyn T. Bruner, Dept. of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine. Her office number is 792-5008, and her email is brunere@musc.edu.