CDA4

Material Cultures of the NHS Hospital:

*Exploring Hospital Spaces through Historical Objects*

**Supervisors**

* Dr Victoria Bates (University of Bristol, victoria.bates@bristol.ac.uk)
* Professor Giovanna Colombetti (University of Exeter, [G.Colombetti@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:G.Colombetti@exeter.ac.uk))
* Dr Laura Humphreys (Science Museum Group, laura.humphreys@sciencemuseum.ac.uk)

We offer a multi-disciplinary team, across history and philosophy in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and object-based expertise at the new National Collections Centre (NCC) and the Science Museum. Together, we can support an exciting, innovative, and interdisciplinary PhD. The HEI-based supervisors, Dr Victoria Bates (Bristol) and Prof. Giovanna Colombetti (Exeter) offer research expertise in hospital/sensory history and phenomenological approaches to material culture. The lead supervisor Dr Bates is the lead of a UKRI-funded ‘Future Leaders Fellowship’ called ‘Sensing Spaces of Healthcare: Rethinking the NHS Hospital’, with recent publications relevant to this PhD including ‘White, colour, and materiality in the twentieth-century British hospital’ (2022). She can support the PGR to connect with relevant research communities at the University of Bristol, including as a steering committee member of the Centre for Health, Humanities and Science. Professor Colombetti works on situated cognition and affect, including the phenomenology of embodiment and materiality. She is currently writing a monograph on affective and embodied relations to objects and spaces. She leads the interdisciplinary ‘Body, Mind & Culture’ research group at the University of Exeter with which the PGR can connect. The HEI supervisors and student will work with Dr Laura Humphreys, Collections Information Project Manager, based at the NCC. Laura works with the Science Museum Group’s stored collections, including c.150,000 historical medical objects, and is currently leading on the new research programme at the NCC.

**Subject**

‘Material Cultures of the NHS Hospital’ will explore the multiple ways in which NHS hospitals (1948-present) have been shaped by objects. Using objects held at the Science Museum Group provides an opportunity for the PGR to engage closely with material culture. They will go beyond images – and a visual idea of hospitals – to explore how historic objects felt, smelled,and sounded. The PGR will take an object (or object type) as the centre of their research, and explore it at different scales, including changes to: its materiality and design, how people interacted with or experienced it, and its place in hospital spaces or built environments.

**Research questions and methods**

Central research questions for the doctoral project will include:

* How have hospital spaces been shaped by objects, as ‘things’ felt and encountered rather than just seen?
* How can attention to different objects – from ‘mundane’ everyday objects to high-technology medical objects – enhance hospital histories?
* How can objects make sense of both national narratives of change in hospital spaces and local stories of individual experiences?

Research questions revolve around material culture, hospital spaces, and objects, but will be shaped by the PGR’s interests. There are opportunities to adapt the project to pursue specific research interests, for example by conducting oral histories of those who designed and used key objects in hospitals. We expect the PGR to focus on a specific type of object (e.g. PPE, signage, scanners), which they will identify in dialogue with supervisors.

This work will be at the forefront of new approaches to hospital history. It will draw on interdisciplinary research methods including:

* Social histories of medicine
* Phenomenology
* Material culture studies
* Spatial biography of objects

**Research context**

In the wake of COVID-19, and with a new hospital building programme under way, hospital design is an increasing area of public and political interest. There is renewed interest in its history, as spaces such as the NHS Nightingale Hospitals emulated older layouts. Objects such as PPE have become an increasingly important part of hospital life, and the regular cleaning of objects has become crucial to infection control. This research will be timely and novel as the first project to engage with objects and materialities of care in NHS history. It will go beyond patients, to include the lives and contribution of staff such as porters and cleaners whose stories are often neglected. Such underrepresented people are of shared interest to researchers, museum professionals and audiences.

**Main resources/collections in this area**

Research will focus on the [Science Museum Objects Collection](https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/); it holds significant pieces from hospitals throughout the NHS, with a particularly strong collection from the 1980s onwards. Relevant objects range from MRI machines to trolleys, beds, badges, machines, signs, and mugs. Photographs show how objects operated in specific spaces and can be supplemented by images available in [Local Hospital Archives](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords/). The Science Museum collaborates with NHS@70 and can provide access to their oral history archives, as well as to archival collections for context (including a recent acquisition from NHS Nightingale Hospitals). The [King’s Fund Archive](https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA_OPAC/web_detail/REFD+A~2FKE?SESSIONSEARCH) includes early NHS studies on material culture (such as beds, mattresses, paint and more). Other London libraries with relevant resources include [RIBA Library](https://www.architecture.com/contact-and-visit/riba-library) and [Wellcome Library](https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/Wuw19yIAAK1Z3Smm).

**Skills developed by student and employability enhancement**

At the Science Museum Group, there is a rigorous, sector-leading programme of formal training to enable people to work safely and effectively with museum collections, which (in addition to new starter, site-based, and H&S inductions) will include:

* Object Handling, Hazard Identification and Management, Stores-based health and safety
* Courses in materials and hazards specific to historic medical collections (e.g. Controlled Drugs; Poisons, Toxins, and Curare, etc).
* Collections Management database courses, both technical and editorial

The student will be embedded with the Collections team at the NCC, made up of curators, collections access facilitators, and public engagement staff. The student will be supported in developing a wide range of skills with this team though shadowing and collaboration. They will also work with the medical history experts based in London (Science Museum) and Manchester (Science and Industry Museum). All of this will give them a significant, hands-on experience of working in an arts and heritage setting.