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Historical Medical Archives and Libraries: The Case of Historical Archive of Eginitio Hospital

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Abstract:

Purpose - One of the goals of modern nursing institutions should be the preservation and promotion of their historical archives, as they represent the primary source of local medical history and society. Medical archives have historical importance and can document the knowledge, the beliefs of healthcare professionals, the development of health and medicine. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of the preservation of historical medical archives and the leading role of the hospital library to their management and promotion, as a golden value-added service, according to the *MLA Standards of Practice for Hospital Libraries and Librarians, 2022*.

Design/methodology/approach - This article will present the challenges that may arise during the establishment and management of a historical medical archive. It will also cover the digitization process of a historical medical archive and the importance of data protection, particularly patient privacy and security. The case of the Historical Archive of Eginitio Hospital and the management by its library will be presented. It is an ambitious and challenging project in progress that will preserve the history of the nursing institution, the historical revolution of neurology and psychiatry and the broader societal impact of these fields.

Findings - The hospital library, by undertaking the management of the institution's historical archive, offers an added value service, which enhances its profile and visibility and highlights it as a place of historical information and acquires a new demanding educational role. As a project, it is not easy because it requires knowledge of archive maintenance and organization, promotion and visibility of the archive to the researchers and to the public, which consequently demands sufficient staff and significant funding.

Originality/value - This paper introduces, for the first time, the issue of managing and organization of a historical hospital archive by its library in Greece.

Index Terms — Historical Medical Archives, Hospital Libraries, Hospital Records, Cultural Heritage, Digitization

I. INTRODUCTION

The preservation of historical medical archives is a significant concern for the research community as these offer primary and valuable resources for researchers and historians and can lead to new treatments and approaches to healthcare [1, 7]. They provide unique items and dynamic

tools for preserving the memory, documenting the medical history, social reforms, providing evidence of the history, goals, values and actions of nursing institutions and are part of national cultural heritage and collective memory [1-4].

Archives can represent human activities and memories of their time but also have the potential to influence social norms and create new social and cultural attempts, like virtual museums, digital collections, storytelling etc. [1]. They have significant historical value, as they document the beliefs of healthcare professionals, the development of medical science and society and contribute to the understanding of evolution of medical knowledge and societal perceptions regarding health, management and treatment of each disease [1].

Like most archival collections, contain various documents (Fig. 1), documents of foundation, legislation, administration, correspondence, official records, annual budget, reports and inventories, architectural drawings, photographic and audiovisual material, scientific publications, biographical material, medical records of past cases, patient files, meetings, nursing school artifacts, brochures, ephemera, laboratory test results, x-rays, medicine bottles, personal doctors archives, recorded lessons, medical equipment etc. [1, 5].

II. HISTORICAL MEDICAL ARCHIVES

A. Why preserve a medical archive

By creating a historical medical archive, the operation, development, historical significance and changes of a nursing institution are preserved for future generations and documented, while the creation of a digital medical archive adds value to the institution itself and contributes to its marketing [3, 5, 6]. Finally, it serves as the permanent repository and historical reference and information center for documents that refer to the history and memory of the institution and medical profession in general [2]. For all these reasons it is essential that historical medical archives are protected and wisely used, as they are irreplaceable material [1, 2, 7].

By the preservation of historical medical records, researchers can find valuable information such as when the first patient was admitted to the hospital, which disease was the most common, how and if the disease was linked to ethnicity, age, residence, profession, gender etc. [7, 8]. Researchers can find photographs of clinics and patients, notes and documents about administration, medical equipment, medication, examinations, development of

clinical practices, social behaviors, bills, treatments, nutrition, experiences, etc. [7, 8].

In addition, researchers can sociologically and historically study the evolution of medical terminology, study hereditary disease profiles, retrieve personal information of patients and families, demographic data, can linguistically study the patient notes and understand the skills, behavior and level of education of patients, social class, etc. [7, 8].



Fig. 1. Content within a hospital historical archive

B. Hospital Libraries and Archives

It is a common international practice for the library of the hospital to undertake the role of collection, management and preservation of the historical medical archive, which offers the library a value-added service that will eventually increase and enhance its profile and visibility, inside and outside the hospital [3, 5, 8]. The Hospital Library, by taking over the management of the “Historical Archive”, acquires a new demanding educational role and becomes a place of historical information, and not only a place of scientific medical information [8].

According to the “Standards of practice for hospital libraries and librarians (2022)” the maintenance and collection of hospital archives ranks hospital library at a gold level of services [9]. However, the disadvantage for the library is obvious, namely the additional work and the legacy of an unorganized material, which requires knowledge of organizing and maintaining archives [8]. In Greece, it is difficult for a library to maintain an archive because most libraries are understaffed and lack significant funding.

C. Challenges

The first step and challenge in founding a historical hospital archive is to gather the “history” and locate the documents, from warehouses, offices, corridors etc. [4]. There is not a specific way of establishing it, but each one follows its own policy, methodology and criteria for including documents in the archive [4].

The next step in founding an archive is to find the adequate place for storing and preserving. The space for a historical hospital archive can be in different places. It could be within the hospital's library, a separate dedicated archive space, or even outside the hospital altogether, yet it must

have the appropriate environmental conditions for the preservation of the material [2].

The archivist should use archival conservation techniques to rescue the material from damage [2]. Finally, funding is crucial for establishing and maintaining archives, as budgets are a common limitation in archival projects. Securing adequate funding allows for proper preservation, organization, and accessibility of historical materials [2, 5].

D. Promotion of a historical medical archive

Nursing institutions that wish to preserve their archives and keep their history present in the memory of the community to which they belong, but also to a wider public, should frequently organize activities with the aim of promoting them [2]. It is important to organize promotional, educational programs and exhibitions to promote interest in the archive and to ensure access, since the information it contains is pivotal for the potential creation of new communities and cultural endeavors [1, 2].

In addition, for visibility reasons, the archive should appear on the website of the library or nursing institution, which will describe its services, mission and actions [2]. The manager of the archive should also collaborate closely with the administration and staff to promote the new service, for example via the hospital's newsletter or information brochures [2]. The archival project can be strengthened and supplemented with oral history of people that influenced the hospital [2].

E. Accessibility

For the library of a nursing institution, the most important mission should be the accessibility to the historical archive. However, because hospital archives and especially patient records contain sensitive information and personal data, and thus they should be approached with care, respect, and consideration of ethical issues and legislation regarding privacy, data protection, and confidentiality, especially if they will be visible through digitization [1, 3, 7]. The need for appropriate preservation of records and the development of access policies should balance with the need for research, protection of personal rights of the individuals involved [7]. Internal regulations and application forms are vital for establishing who can access the archives, under what conditions and for what reasons ensuring integrity and preservation.

F. Digitization

Nowadays, the digitization of cultural heritage has been a more important task than ever and therefore there is a significant need to digitize historical hospital archives having considerable historical, cultural and scientific value, which can be effectively preserved in perpetuity [6, 7]. Digitization projects, tools and infrastructures have made it possible to preserve and share cultural heritage with a wider audience, preserving important and sensitive documents at risk and creating valuable resources for scholars in the future [6, 7].

The purpose of digitization is to locate the material and make it accessible from anywhere and at any time, while at the same time allowing for better and easier examination and analysis of the archival material [3]. In addition,

digitization increases the accessibility and use of the material, which becomes more accessible and traceable, and hence it can now reach new audiences, beyond the community of the nursing institution itself, while at the same time it can be shared at a national and international level [3, 5]. With digitization, the researcher does not need to have the original document and so instead of traveling to the archive, the archive comes to the researcher [3].

In addition, the challenges of preserving handwritten documents and their correct transcription require the collaboration of experts and the use of advanced technologies [7]. With the help of an AI (Artificial Intelligence) model, researchers can find answers to questions based on historical perspectives and this will enhance research and understanding of medical science [7].

III. HISTORICAL ARCHIVE OF EGINITIO HOSPITAL

A. Eginitio Hospital

Eginitio Hospital (Fig. 2) founded by the initiative of the first Professor Michael Katsaras in 1904 thanks to the bequest of Dionysius and Helen Eginitis [10]. It initially housed the Neuropsychiatry headquarters and much later (1963) was separated in two clinics, those of A' Neurology and A' Psychiatry of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens [10]. As a university hospital, it offers educational and postgraduate programs, develops and promotes medical research through many laboratories and special units.



Fig. 2. Photo of Eginitio Hospital

B. About Historical Archive

According to the Organization Chart of Eginitio Hospital, the Patient Admission Office and Archive manages the active Archive. Fifteen years ago, Professor of Neurology I. Evdokimidis had the idea of establishing the historical archive of our hospital. Professor Evdokimidis initially determined the documentary and informational value of the archival material and selected the documents that today constitute the Historical Archive of Eginitio Hospital, with the aim of preserving them in perpetuity.

This was a difficult and time-consuming undertaking, which did not always have the support it deserved, and it is still an ongoing procedure. In recent years, this initiative has strengthened with the establishment of the Historical Archive Committee, which consists of Emeritus Professor of Neurology I. Evdokimidis, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry D. Ploumbidis and Professor of Neurology C. Potagas. Since 2023, the library has undertaken the management and maintenance of the Historical Archive, in collaboration with the Committee.

C. Space of the Historical Archive

The records and files of the historical archive were in various places in the hospital, due to lack of space and exposed to damaging factors (dust, humidity, insects, etc.). In 2017, the archive placed in a special space inside the old hospital building. Initially the archival material placed without proper organization in wooden bookcases until October 2023, which then replaced by metal bookcases that lock and ensure better protection from damaging factors (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Space of the Historical Archive before and after management

D. Content of the Historical Archive

The Historical Archive includes files or books, from 1904 to 1992: inpatient and outpatient registrations, clinical files, outpatient clinical activity books, accounting books, books of expenses, books of incoming and outgoing patients and patient files, books of drugs, books of treatment, books of laboratory tests, books of draft patient histories, books of daily reports, protocols of incoming and outgoing documents, patient name indices, patient diagnosis books, student exercise book, electroshock books, cardio shock books, EEG books, supplies books, nutrition books, warehouse and furniture books, emergency books, nursing books, outpatient history books.

E. Preservation and maintenance of Archival Material

The archival material was in good condition, despite its inappropriate previous storage. The folders cleaned from dust and harmful and unnecessary objects, which considered dangerous for the oxidation and deterioration of the documents, removed. Medical gloves and microfiber cloths used for the procedure; harmed folders were replaced with new ones.

Most of the documents were in special file folders and very few documents were loose. The loose documents placed in special file folders, in which their content indicated, following the terminology used by the staff of the Patient Admission Office. When the digitization of the material is complete, the material will be stored in appropriate paper archival storage boxes for greater protection.

F. Access record and arrangement

The first recording of the material carried out by a team of Historical Archive of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Microsoft Access. The following

information entered: accession number, classification number, folder name, organization, content, chronology, old name title, material condition, number of file sheets. Each folder obtained a unique classification number. The existing subject categories maintained, and the file classification numbers assigned according to them.

After the recording of the archival material, the classification number labeled on the spine and cover of the files. The files rearranged and classified according to the classification numbers. During the summer of 2023, with the valuable experience and assistance of historian and researcher Despo Kritsotaki of Academy of Athens completed the data recording of our archival material. The data entry of the content into Microsoft Access facilitated the processing of the data and allowed easy and quick access for historians and researchers. This form of accession record became the base for the later functions of arrangement and description of the archive.

G. Finding Aids

By the end of the recording of the archive, three indices created in Microsoft Excel format (Fig. 4), as supplementary research tools, to facilitate researchers and historians:

- Numerical index: according to classification number
- Alphabetical index: according to the File Title/Subject
- Chronological index: according to the File's chronologies

Fig. 4. Indices of Historical Archive

Our archive offers also to researchers the possibility to use oral history tools for a more complete historical research of nursing institutions [11]. A research team of professors Evdokimidis, Lekka, Ploumbidis and historian and researcher Despo Kritsotaki interviewed members of medical, nursing and administrative staff of Eginitio Hospital, who worked during the period 1950-1979, in order to establish an oral history archive of our hospital [11].

H. Database Celifos

Our hospital, on the initiative of the Committee of Professors D. Ploumbidis, I. Evdokimidis and C. Potagas, secured a grant from the I. Martinos Foundation for the digitization of part of the Historical Archive. The digitization began in June 2024 and completed in May 2025. In the first phase, only the records of in-house patients digitized, for the period of 1904-1955.

Private company has created a database (Fig. 5) that researchers can search using filters and access digital copies

of patient records. Thus, researchers can search using filters that include place of birth, place of residence, occupation, diagnosis, outcome, hospitalizations, and visits. Researchers can also use the database within the hospital, either in the Historical Archive or in the Hospital Library, having access to the full content of the files, but without knowing the names of the patients. Furthermore, the database is remotely available. In the first year, it will be available through the company that digitized the archival material and accessed via the hospital's website.

Fig. 5. Celifos database

I. Accessibility

Researchers, historians and anyone wishing to study our archival material may have access to it after completing the Researcher's Application. With the Application, researchers must comply with the Regulation on the Operation of the Historical Archive and the Regulation of the European Union for the protection of personal data and sensitive information. Then the application submitted for approval to the Historical Archive Committee, who is also responsible for the management of the historical archive.

Researchers can study the physical archival material in the Historical Archive or in the library, by appointment from Monday to Friday from 8.00 a.m. to 13.30 p.m. Those interested in using the database within the hospital should complete the Researcher's Application, while if they wish to have remote access to the full content of the database, in addition to the application, they should create a user account for a specific access period.

J. Open Access Catalog

The Historical Archive is also available through the library's open access catalog at openABEKT (Fig. 6) of the Eginitio Hospital Library. For each folder a bibliographic record is created, with full documentation and description with link to the digital archive for the digitized material (<https://eginitiolib.openabekt.gr/el/collections/685253fb8140fb717e00622a>). For subject indexing of the records was used the thesaurus of medical terms of National Documentation Center and subject headings of National Library, or translation of Medical Subject Headings of NLM.

After the subject indexing of the archival material, a new alphabetical subject index created according to the subject terms.

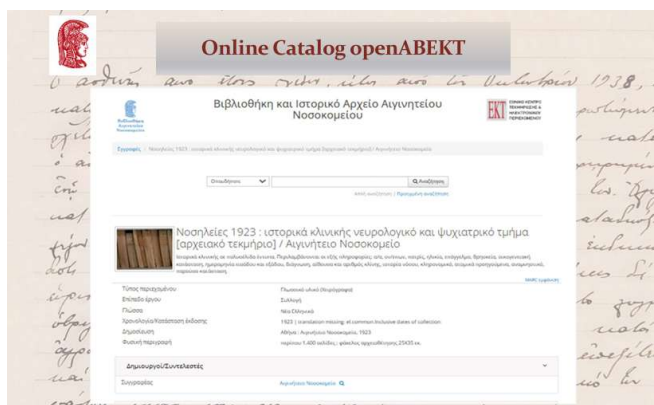


Fig. 6. A bibliographic record of a historical archive folder

K. Importance of the Historical Archive of Eginitio Hospital

The medical files and administrative documents that currently kept in our Historical Archive are evidence of the life and history of our hospital. They bring to light stories and discoveries related to the academic and scientific world of the past and illuminate aspects of the sciences of Neurology and Psychiatry.

Today, with the preservation of the Historical Archive of Eginitio Hospital, researchers, historians, students and all citizens can carry out research, studies and dissertations, utilizing valuable and rare archival material. They can study diseases, demographic and nosological characteristics of patients, where without the preservation and access to this primary source, the study of the history of medicine and research would be impossible.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, historical medical archives are part of the national cultural heritage, they contribute to the preservation of the collective memory of society and the understanding of the history of medicine [7]. The creation of electronic patient records is important, but equally important is the preservation of older records and archives for historical and other reasons. By rescuing and providing access to these records, we can honor the diversity of human experiences and promote a more inclusive understanding of our cultural heritage [7].

Hospitals in Greece should recognize the need to preserve and digitize their historical archives, as they offer valuable information and documentation. With the help of new technologies and artificial intelligence, answers to important questions can be answered, which will be based on the sources of historical archives of health. For the implementation of this project, there should be close and harmonious cooperation between different specialties, archivists, librarians, historians, medical, nursing staff and administration, with the aim of better management and promotion of the archives.

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