



SPACE LAB

A NEW TWIST ON THE TRADITIONAL PATHOLOGY MUSEUM HAS PROVIDED AN INSPIRATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR AUCKLAND MEDICAL STUDENTS. KIM COTTON TAKES A LOOK.

If you wanted to study the human body in a rich and inspiring environment, New Zealand's AMRF Medical Sciences Learning Centre would be a good place to start.

The centre is an architectural standout – it has even won a national architecture award – and pays magnificent homage to the disciplines of pathology and anatomy.

It reveres (rather than merely displays) specimens from The University of Auckland's Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences and is quickly gaining a reputation among students.

Opened in 2005, the centre was an ambitious project borne out of a desire to combine the faculty's anatomy and pathology museums.



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– Professor Peter Browett

But when the pathology and anatomy departments decided on the merger, they had little idea of the positive impact the project would have on the university’s students and staff.

Professor Peter Browett, head of the university’s Department of Molecular Medicine and Pathology, says the motivation to create the learning centre was to produce synergies between the departments and to provide better access for students to the specimens that had previously been locked away in “tired and old” rooms.

“We got together as a group and thought ... more of our teaching was becoming more integrated, why don’t we look to combine so we have a museum or learning centre where the students can come in and see the normal anatomy, the radiology and pathology altogether that they can access at anytime,” he says.

LEARNING CURVE

The remarkable transformation was the brainchild of New Zealand architect Rick

Pearson, who based the design on the circular-shaped, 16th-century anatomy theatre of the University of Padua in Italy.

In an article featured in *ArchitectureNZ* magazine, Mr Pearson says “the driving concept” behind the learning centre was the “idea of investigation”.

“What drove artists, researchers and physicians in all cultures throughout history into trying to understand the workings of the human body?” he asks.

“For me it was the fact that at the intersection between art and science is the notion of wonderment.”

Celebration and “wonderment” are indeed outstanding features. Among the 1100 pathology specimens and plastinated anatomy models – showcased along more than one kilometre of glass shelving – are the reminders of a previous era of medical research and its modern equivalent: an image of Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man is splayed out across the floor of the main tutorial room, while similar anatomical computer-generated

sketches cover the windows, evoking a sense of morbid enlightenment.

Sophisticated lighting and technological equipment bring visitors back to the realisation that this is a place of teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Professor Browett says when the idea was first floated to the university management it assumed the plans would entail another refit of a museum “where we’ll take everything out, repaint it, put the shelves back up and restock everything again”, he says.

“As the presentation went on I could see the change come over everybody – everybody was taken by it.”

The core contains the bulk of the specimens and is used as a tutorial room for large groups. Desks and computers are positioned around the sides to extend its functionality. Six nodes, themed on the organ systems, branch out from the core to provide separate study areas for individual students or small groups.

Snatched from oblivion

Back in 1985, news that part of Australia's oldest hospital would soon be no more left staff from the pathology department scrambling to save their morbid anatomy collection from being confined to the dustbin of history.

Professor Stan McCarthy got to work quickly.

The former pathologist at the Sydney Hospital's Kanematsu Memorial Institute of Pathology and now Senior Staff Specialist and Consultant at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) Department of Anatomical Pathology was instrumental in retaining more than 1500 specimens, as well as cabinets full of biopsy and autopsy reports.

Some of them were more than a century old.

In a scene akin to an Alfred Hitchcock film, Professor McCarthy and staff chauffeured the motley cargo from Sydney Hospital to various attics and basements at RPAH.

Among the stores were a distorted, two-digit cancerous hand of a radiologist who had worked at Sydney Hospital in 1899, and the lacy skeleton of a farmer's pelvis and femur both eaten away by *Echinococcus multilocularis* (hydatid cysts).

Professor McCarthy says he was motivated by "extreme reluctance to discard anything that would be useful for teaching and research and which had been retained with so much thought and dedication".

He remained the specimens' quiet custodian until 2001, when a spirited and passionate museum curator, Elinor Wrobel (pictured), contacted him.

Mrs Wrobel had been commissioned by Sydney Hospital to set up a museum of nursing. But in her mind, the museum needed to encompass the hospital's entire history and it was under her expansive vision that the Dr Eddie Hirst Pathology Museum was re-established as a section of the Lucy Osburn-Nightingale Foundation Museum.

Over the past six years, Professor McCarthy has made the familiar trip between the hospitals numerous times to repatriate a large number of the specimens.

"Their preservation was due to the fact that Professor McCarthy has such a sense of history," Mrs Wrobel says.

"It was really an emergency thing that he did and it can never be underestimated."

Each specimen is carefully assessed and conserved with the assistance of volunteers such as Dr Patricia Bale, a retired pathologist and widow of Dr Eddie Hirst, Sydney Hospital's former director of anatomical pathology.

Today about 400 surviving specimens are displayed and another 1000 are awaiting conservation.

Mrs Wrobel, now also a volunteer, says her aim is to leave a monument to the "great hospital that once was on Macquarie Street".

The Sydney Foundation for Medical Research provided major funding to conserve some of the morbid anatomy collection. A new fund, Adopt a Body Part, is available for donors to adopt a specimen.

For details phone Elinor Wrobel on 61 2 9382 7427 or 61 2 9332 2260.



Professor Browett says it has made the collection more accessible to students and has provided another "angle of learning".

"It's always been there but it's made it much more [appealing]," he says. "We're making greater use of it than we did with either museum. That's the most gratifying thing – not only have we created something that is aesthetically pleasing that the university can be proud of but it's achieved what we want – it's encouraging the students to go there on their own accord. They're putting pressure on us to have it open longer hours."

Funded by the Auckland Medical Research Foundation to celebrate 50 years of medical research in Auckland, the learning centre is used extensively by undergraduates in medicine, science and nursing from The University of Auckland and other tertiary education institutions, as well as registrars in pathology and radiology.

Professor Browett says plans are in play to open the centre to senior high-school students.

"I don't think any of us could have appreciated just how impressive it was going to be," he says. "There are other opportunities here that we haven't fully utilised yet." 🔥