

## Media Review

MEDIC@, <http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histmed/medica.htm>

The Inter-university Library of Health is a French medical library, located in Paris, resulting from the recent merging of two venerable institutions, the Inter-university Library of Medicine and the Inter-university Library of Pharmacy. It harbours a large patrimonial collection, built up over the centuries from ‘strata’ of acquisitions, legacies from physicians and apothecaries, historical opportunities like the libraries seized from religious congregations and émigrés during the French Revolution, as well as individual librarians’ interests and conservation choices.<sup>1</sup> For those who cannot visit the brick-and-mortar Library, the Medic@ website offers online access to documents from its old and rare collections, as well as to electronic resources from other repositories concerned with the history of medicine. Since 2002, the staff of the Library’s Department for the History of Medicine has been developing this digital library, which is primarily aimed at scholars working on the history of medicine. Medic@ is a valuable asset to the Library’s other documentary services, which include an online databank of images, comprising 80 000 items, a bio-bibliographic database of physicians, and a series of virtual exhibitions. The website’s search interfaces and online environment are in French. While this may constitute a real hindrance for non-francophone users, the sober but effective thematic display of the collection on Medic@’s landing page and translations into English of introductions to specific topics and related corpora might facilitate navigation of the website for non-French-speaking users.

Medic@ possesses a treasure of 14 000 written documents digitised from the Library’s holdings, mostly in French and ancient languages, from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century. The digital library also has roughly 76 000 notices signalling documents that have been digitised in other repositories. The collection is focused on expressly medical or scientific primary source documents of varied genres, including medical monographs, old pharmacopoeias, medical dictionaries, theses, periodicals, instrument catalogues, and manuscripts. Medic@ has furnished holdings relevant to a vast range of topics in medicine and allied sciences, covering, *inter alia*, women in medicine, the development of scientific medicine in nineteenth-century France, medical anthropology in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, cosmetology and particular diseases. Other riches include a set of Xavier Bichat manuscripts from the Library’s holdings, Etienne Jules Marey’s complete published work, an important collection of editions of ancient sources from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, and complete digitised versions of 30 French-speaking medical journals, spanning from their origins to 1940.

On Medic@’s homepage, the core of the collection is classified into 13 clearly delineated series, which are themselves subdivided into coherent thematic folders, each encompassing a corpus of documents. Medic@’s organisation reflects its primary purpose of serving scholars, and the way the series are defined emphasises classical keywords in the history of medicine. Three series are related to ancient medicine and natural history. Another one includes medical texts written in the medieval period.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Vincent, ‘Les collections anciennes de la bibliothèque interuniversitaire de médecine de Paris’, *La Revue du Praticien*, 58 (2008), 690–3.

'Physicians and scholars' features 'monographic folders' and revolves around important figures in the history of mostly French medicine and medical sciences. 'Medical Specialties', a remarkably rich series, gathers corpora for a variety of medical branches and doctrines, including anatomy, forensic medicine, gerontology, psychology and psychiatry. Pharmaceutical science and practices have a series of their own, comprising treatises on materia medica, compounding recipes and advertising material. Two other series gather documents related to the history of medical and pharmaceutical sciences. The site has also introduced an engaging series on 'Epidemics and diseases', with subcollections on given diseases, currently including material on melancholia, plague and migraine. A noteworthy series, entitled 'References', provides access to a collection of medical dictionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, useful guides to theses completed at the Paris School of Medicine from 1789 to 1975, as well as periodicals. Finally, in the 'Miscellaneous' series, users can browse through a collection of written documents assembled by type, editor or topic. Curious users might want to pay attention to the 'Diverse' folder, as it contains some precious items as well as some surprises; a collection of letters and reports to the Faculty of Medicine from French and foreign physicians on smallpox inoculation, satirical journals, legal texts, songs, and so on, which together amount to a fantastic medical inventory in the Prévert manner.

After clicking on a thematic folder, the user is taken to a page that displays a window, and can then scroll through a list of summary bibliographic notices, arranged alphabetically by author. This 'search mode' has the clear benefit of providing an overview of the breadth of related documents available in the collection, as well as whetting the user's curiosity about an item he might not have spontaneously looked for. Research in this mode is not particularly easy, however, as the documents in the individual folders are often abundant, numbering in the hundreds. To help users in their search, Medic@ provides introductions written by external specialists (historians, philosophers and physicians) to most of the folders, which are often but not systematically translated into English. For example, in the 'Epidemics and diseases' series, before accessing the 116 digitised documents included in the 'migraine' folder, users can consult an excellent introduction, written by the philosopher Ester Lardreau-Cotelle. The author puts the corpus into historical perspective by providing a synthesis of key terminological, definitional and classificatory issues in the nineteenth-century history of the medical concept of migraine, and links are provided to the corresponding sources in the corpus. In general, the introductions are useful guides to the folders, presenting the intellectual contexts and issues at stake for a given subject, and sometimes also providing additional tools such as chronological indexes for the documents included in a corpus. The introductions vary in length, content and purpose, however. It is unfortunate that they do not systematically contain links to corresponding documents in the corpus since it proves to be an excellent aid in browsing the wealth of material made available in Medic@.

A more targeted exploration of the collection is better served by using the website's search interface which allows users to locate documents via author, date or keywords. In this connection, one drawback of Medic@'s search engine is that relevant entries for keyword search are limited to the bibliographic notices and the tables of contents of the books digitised by the Library. The website has also created specific search engines for its large collections of digitised periodicals and old medical dictionaries. Both are keyword searchable as a whole, making it possible to retrieve, in one request, all the relevant results across the full collection of the medical journals or dictionaries that are on offer. This is a time-saving tool and might, in the latter case, be especially valuable

for users interested in tracing the evolving definitions of a given medical concept over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The great majority of documents are made available in full text. They load quickly and can be browsed either by chapter or page by page. Each can be downloaded in PDF format, either as a whole or as extracts. Furthermore, most of the documents stemming from French institutions that are distributed through Medic@ handily come under an open licence authorising both commercial and non-commercial free usage as long as the relevant source is acknowledged. Moreover, should a specific document (before 1900) from the brick-and-mortar Library's holdings not be available on Medic@, it is possible to order a digital reproduction for a fee, which will have the secondary benefit of enhancing the digital's library collection.

To scholars conversant with ancient languages or French, Medic@ provides straightforward and convenient access to a rich and coherent collection, covering a broad range of topics in medical science and practice. For non-francophone researchers, navigation of the website might be a little demanding but should, on specific subjects entailing documents in another language, be rewarding. While the website's focus is not on relating the various medical subjects to the social and intellectual contexts in which they emerged, it definitely fulfils its mission as a patrimonial digital library. Medic@ builds upon a long tradition of documentary collection and services, which is currently endangered by the continuous price inflation of periodicals, as well as by important budgetary constraints in the university with which the Inter-university Library of Health is affiliated. In 2014, the Library had to terminate its subscriptions to major printed and electronic journals, including titles it had collected since their first issue in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In this context, Medic@ not only testifies to the Library's heritage but also illustrates the priceless value of building public resources.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www2.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/wordpress/index.php/contraintes-budgetaires-desabonnements-2014/>.

<sup>3</sup> To consult the Library's staff blog which campaigns for the Library's research services and mission, see: <http://biusanteendanger.blogspot.fr/>.