COM-P Faculty Member Uses Antique Medical Devices to Teach Future Physicians

College of Medicine – Phoenix
October 2019

While medicine has evolved immensely over the years, a College of Medicine – Phoenix faculty member believes that looking back to old treatments and tools of the trade provides important lessons for future physicians.

The college is home to more than 300 medical antiques curated and owned by Robert Kravetz, a gastroenterologist and clinical professor of internal medicine [1] and medical humanism [2].

He has been collecting since 1970, when he bought 6,000 pounds of medical history from a Newburyport, Massachusetts, drugstore that opened in 1845. Thus began his quest for treasures that tell the story of how medical instruments and practices have been refined. Today, his collection comprises 1,500 pieces.

His personal favorites are a Revolutionary War-era drug chest and a leech jar from the late 1800s.

Among the displays shown in cases throughout the Phoenix Biomedical Campus [3] are tools that allowed doctors to manually count red blood cells, amputation saws, forceps, tonsil dissectors, retractors and sigmoidoscopes.


Some of the pharmaceuticals displayed are still used today, such as nitroglycerin and digitalis – both still treat some heart problems. Many diagnostic devices have endured, with improvements, such as otoscopes to look into the ear, stethoscopes to listen to the heart or lungs, nebulizers for breathing treatments and blood pressure monitors.

Inside the cases are some items best categorized as quackery: cigarettes that claim to ease asthma, devices for bloodletting, and a 1930s violet ray machine, which emitted a purple light and was applied to the body.

"Totally worthless," Kravetz said of the violet ray machine. "We have so many medicines today, but years ago, there was very little available. That's why people would use these various products. When there isn't a beneficial therapy for something, people will try anything."

Although seemingly unimportant to current medical practice, the antiquated devices are an important reminder to today’s physicians in training, he says.

"We have to realize that where we are today is because of all those who have preceded us," he said. "We have to pay homage to them and give them credit. We also can learn from the
medical mistakes of the past, as there have been some drastic things done that have not been beneficial to patients."

Every student at the College of Medicine ? Phoenix has the opportunity to learn about the medical antiques in depth during the elective course Independent Study in the History of Medicine. Kravetz, who directs the course, gives each student a medical antique to research.

The curriculum is based on learning about a medical topic related to the residency program the student plans to pursue.

"I give them free rein to choose whatever topic they wish and try to instill in them the importance of the history of medicine," he said. "If you don't know about the past, you don't know where you are going in the future."

Kravetz hopes the gifts from his personal collection will be the beginning of students' own collections.

He tells the future physicians that "as you go through your four years in medical school, look at the antiques on campus and see how they relate to what you are learning at the present time."

A version of this article originally appeared on the College of Medicine ? Phoenix website.

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