

AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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March 19, 2015

Dr. Francis S. Collins (Director, National Institutes of Health)
Dr. Donald A.B. Lindberg (Director, National Library of Medicine)
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Collins and Dr. Lindberg:

I am writing in regard to the review being undertaken by the Working Group on the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The American Historical Association strongly supports the History of Medicine Division (HMD) of the National Library of Medicine. The National Library of Medicine, in particular the History of Medicine Division, is a vital national resource that supports scholarship, education, and public knowledge of medicine and historical and current public health issues.

With over 14,000 members the American Historical Association is the largest association in the United States devoted to the study and promotion of history and historical thinking across society. Research and publication by many of our members and other historians relies on the collections and support of the History of Medicine Division. In addition, many valuable and important historical projects have been made possible by NLM grants for scholarly works.

The National Library of Medicine's unparalleled collection of primary historical sources dating back to the 11th century is of inestimable value to historians for both research and education. The more than 600,000 printed volumes in the History of Medicine Division—including the earliest printed medical works, thousands of books published between the 16th and 18th centuries, and many more up to the present day—make the collection an invaluable research resource. The NLM's historical collections have two very significant functions. First, they are a treasure trove of manuscripts and books that document the human struggle against disease from classical antiquity until today. The riches of the collection were beautifully highlighted in NLM historian Michael Sappol's 2012 book *Hidden Treasures*. They range from unique medieval Islamic texts that provide our best evidence of the foundations of Western medicine in ancient Greece, to the textbooks from which 20th-century American doctors learned their craft, to collections of papers of such key modern figures as Joshua Lederberg, Marshall Nirenberg, Luther Terry, and C. Everett Koop. These print collections are complemented by a growing digital collection, making this library a resource like no other in this hemisphere.

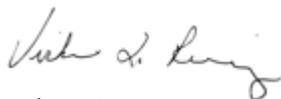
Second, public education about the history of medicine is vital for promotion of health in modern US society, and the History of Medicine Division is also actively involved in this through its award-winning exhibits and programs. Mary E. Fissell, professor of the history of medicine at The Johns Hopkins University, has provided us with an excellent example of the value of these exhibits:

The HMD has fully embraced the possibilities afforded by the digital age, and has pioneered a series of online exhibits that continue to be one of the most significant resources in our field. I literally cannot tell you how often I direct the students to one of the online resources of the NLM. For example, in my undergraduate survey, one of the assignments is to go to the website Historical Anatomies, and choose images from pre-Vesalian anatomy books to compare with the work of Vesalius himself. Students bring all kinds insights to discussions from their close investigation of such anatomical images. There is simply no way students would access this kind of material in any other setting. But the NLM's prescience in developing this kind of online exhibit enables me to teach undergraduates who will be tomorrow's physicians to understand and appreciate the intellectual processes involved in delving into the mysteries of the human body.

Historians of medicine are also increasingly working with the most innovative digital tools to address research questions. Fields such as historical epidemiology are breaking new ground that improves our ability to understand contemporary patterns and how best to prevent disease. Historical perspectives on disease, such as that presented in the HMD's blog *Circulating Now*, provide a vital understanding of such diseases as measles and influenza, both of which are of concern to contemporary medicine and public health. Another example of this work that has benefited greatly from the HMD collections and working with the staff is "An Epidemiology of Information: Data Mining the 1918 Influenza Pandemic." This project brings together historians, computer scientists, and biomedical scientists to utilize big data understand the spread of knowledge about the 1918 pandemic. These are just a couple of examples of the vital connection between scientific knowledge and historical inquiry that an attention to "big data" provides. The HMD is uniquely placed to provide expertise to make this essential link possible.

To sum up, alongside the crucial functions of the NLM in relation to biomedical research, the library has an equally vital role in collecting, curating, and providing access to the rich history of medicine in the United States and across the world. It is a key node in providing crucial links between history of medicine and biomedical science in the United States. We strongly advise that the NIH continue its 150-year tradition of support for scholarship in the history of medicine through the History of Medicine Division of the National Library of Medicine.

Sincerely,



Vicki L. Ruiz
President, 2015