



February 17, 2015

What is the point of keeping our collection? Why keep these dusty jars of old, human tissue? These are good questions. I have devoted over a decade of my life to the Mütter's unique collection of medical specimens, objects, and ephemera, and to answer these questions I like to tell a story.

In 2007 Hendrik Poinar from the Ancient DNA Laboratory of McMaster University in Canada approached me. His team was interested in obtaining specimens of human intestines with cholera for a study. We happened to have six specimens dating to the 1849 cholera outbreak in Philadelphia that killed over 1000 people. The researchers were not interested in the DNA of the intestine's owner but of the cholera inhabiting it. Of the six intestines one returned a viable result. This was the first time a 19<sup>th</sup> century, fluid-preserved specimen yielded viable DNA. We discovered that the cholera strain of the 1840's is not the same strain present today-an important insight into how the disease evolves. In January, 2014 we published an article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* and in February another in the *Scientific Reports of Nature*.

The articles resulted in a flurry of interest from researchers from all over the world. We decided to create a special research arm of the Mütter Museum specifically devoted to utilizing our rich 19<sup>th</sup> century collection for 21<sup>st</sup> century research. Thus the Mütter Institute was born. However, our goals are not just to work with our own collection but to reach out to other museums and institutions with similar collections to show them the potential scientific value of their specimens and to encourage and help them to maintain their collections.

None of this would have happened without the six unassuming jars of intestines preserved by the Mütter Museum for over 150 years. As technological advancements occur in the scientific and medical fields we are finding new ways to unlock the secrets housed in our historic collections. I invite you to visit us and to learn more about the Mütter Institute and our mission. Who knows what our specimens – or yours - may reveal about the past that could inform the future?

The answers are here, we just have to ask the right questions.

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