



**December 14, 2018**

What is the point of keeping our collection? Why keep these dusty jars of old, human tissue? I have devoted over fourteen years 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, Dr. Hendrik Poinar from the Ancient DNA Centre 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 examined, one returned a viable result. This marked the first time that a 19th 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 the evolution of disease. In 2014, we reported our findings in *The New England Journal of Medicine and Scientific Reports of Nature*.

The articles generated a flurry of interest from researchers from all over the world. We decided to create a special research arm of the Mütter Museum devoted to utilizing our rich historic collection for 21st century research. Thus, the Mütter Research Institute was born. Our goals, however, extend beyond our own collection to include other museums and institutions with similar collections to demonstrate the scientific value of their specimens and to encourage and help them maintain their collections.

None of this would have happened without the six jars of intestines preserved unopened 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.**

**Anna N. Dhody**  
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