

## CHAPTER 4

# Medicine

*Beware of medical books. You may die of a misprint.*

**Mark Twain**

### NEW YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE

Location: 1216 Fifth Avenue at 103rd Street, New York, NY 10029

URL: <http://www.nyam.org/#sthash.D0nr4Fdw.dpuf>

Library Catalog: <http://www.nyam.org/library/>

Blog: <http://nyamcenterforhistory.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nyamnyc>

E-mail: [library@nyam.org](mailto:library@nyam.org)

Telephone: (212) 822-7315

Transportation: Bus line 3 or 4

This was the first library I visited since getting the contract to write this book, so I was eager to get it right. I got in on the early train to Penn Station, and the day famous for drenching rain, so I took the No. 4 bus from 32nd Street, which made its torturous way up Madison Avenue to 103rd Street—a journey that took about 45 minutes and got me to the door right on time. If I had been in more of a hurry I would have walked two blocks farther east to Lexington Avenue and taken the subway uptown.

New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) is a grand marble building on 5th Avenue, but the entrance is actually on 103rd Street. While waiting to be seen, I sat at a table in a pleasant coffee shop that is off the lobby of the academy. I was met by Arlene Shaner, Reference Librarian for Historical Collections, Center for the History of Medicine and Public Health, and Anne Garner, Library Curator. Arlene had been working at the library for decades and turned out to have a considerable knowledge of the other libraries on my target list. Anne was younger and had recently joined NYAM after working at the Metropolitan Museum.

Access to the public must be prearranged, but Shaner said that they schedule a number of visits for graduate students, undergraduates,

writers, and lay people of all stripes. They do NOT serve people on a self-diagnosis quest. The librarians will urge anybody with those ideas to pick a doctor or find a library with a specialty in current medicine (which turns out to be a very hard task, even in New York City). The library consists of books on all aspects of the history of medicine and health sciences.

The main reading room is a rectangular space with high shelves along each wall, with study space consisting mainly of hardwood tables and chairs. Unlike most libraries, NYAM did not allow me to take any pictures, so the best mental image I can offer is the library of Downton Abbey. The books visible in the reading room are the tip of the iceberg, since the library boasts a collection of more than 500,000 volumes. Their online catalog is run on Koha, an open access system, and they use ByWater as their automation service provider. Searching that catalog, I saw that the books were arranged in Library of Congress order.

From a long-past visit to NYAM, I remember that their most significant holding is a set of George Washington's false teeth, but I was quickly corrected by Shaner that museum holdings of the organization are separate from those of the library. I asked what item they would consider to be their most significant holding, and I was told that it was *de Re Culinaria* by Apicius, a ninth century manuscript written by German monks in Fulda, consisting of recipes from the monastery kitchen. That is their oldest cookbook, but cookery seems to be a major subject at NYAM, since their catalog lists nearly 2000 titles on the subject.

I also asked them who was the most famous person to use their library. The answer came quickly from Shaner, who mentioned Sir William Osler, a famous physician who founded Johns Hopkins Hospital, and author of *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, a milestone book used in medical education for most of the twentieth century.

Asked about their funding, they told me that the three main factors were the endowments that created the organization in 1847, grants, and an active Friends of the Rare Books Room organization. Memberships begin at \$75 for a basic membership and continue up to \$10,000 for a Vesalius Circle Benefactor, whose benefits include a cocktail party for the member and 15 of his or her friends.

With a collection this rich in pre-1923 titles, digitization would seem like a natural pursuit. "We have digitized eleven titles, but we are making plans for a much bigger effort in the future," said Garner.

## **LIBRARY: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY SCIENCE, INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS LIBRARY**

188 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

URL: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/sibl>

Telephone: (917) 275-6975

Transportation: Bus line M34, M3, or M4; subway: NRQ Herald Square

After visiting the New York Academy of Medicine, a major source of books in the history of medicine, I was interested in locating a library with current information about medicine that would be open to the public. It turns out that this is a task that is nearly impossible. There were far more free law libraries than I could cover in this book, but practically nothing in the way of medicine. There are a number of fine medical libraries in the five boroughs, but they are universally closed to the public. One hospital library in Queens was listed in a directory as being open to the public. When I called them the librarian was evasive about what level of access a citizen might have. When I told her why I wanted to visit her library, evasive turned to hostile as I was told that I may not mention her library in my book. It reminded me of a line in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—"We hope we may be able to serve you in some other lifetime."

I turned to the METRO organization in New York City and worked with a librarian who specialized in medical institutions. She encountered the same kind of slammed doors that I had found.

I finally decided that I would settle on a well-funded branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL). I first looked in at the SIBL (Science, Industry and Business Library) on Madison off of 34th Street. This is a beautiful and impressive library, but their selection of medical reference was unremarkable—no more than you might find in a Long Island public library. I had spent a few minutes looking in the catalog to get an idea of which section to visit (SIBL has a combination of Dewey and Library of Congress—the circulating books were Dewey and the reference was Library of Congress), and I noticed that a lot of medical reference titles were found in the Mid-Manhattan library, across 5th Avenue from the main library. I decided to throw my lot in with that library.

## **LIBRARY: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY MID-MANHATTAN BRANCH**

Address: 455 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY

URL: <http://www.nypl.org/locations/mid-manhattan-library>

Telephone: (917) 275-6975

E-mail: <http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.admin.BuildForm?&institution=10208&type=1&language=1>

Access: Open to the public

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/midmanhattanlibrary?fref=ts>

When I visited on a Friday in the spring, the Mid-Manhattan was bustling in a way that almost approached the crowds on 42nd Street. I found that medical reference was located on the 4th floor, so I headed up the crowded elevator. I soon found the medical reference ranges and they immediately told me a story about what is happening in library reference, at least in the medical sciences. First of all, there was a substantial medical reference collection here—at least 20 full shelves by my count. However, there were a number of empty shelves in the same area. This tells me that the library is moving from paper reference to online at a pretty fast clip. I would guess that these books are being replaced by databases that are accessible only in the library, as opposed to databases that you can access from home using the barcode on your NYPL card. I checked on their Web page and found that this was true for about two-thirds of the 35 medical databases that they listed.

One database that everyone can use is Medline, and in checking up on the Mid-Manhattan branch, I saw that they held programs for people who wanted to get the most out of this comprehensive medical database supplied by the government.

As reference information flows from paper-based to the Cloud, there seems little likelihood that New York City will ever get a truly world-class medical library that can be used by members of the public. In case I am right, the Mid-Manhattan branch of the NYPL seems like the best alternative.

## FURTHER READING

Celebrating the contributions of William Osler: <http://www.medicalarchives.jhmi.edu/osler/biography.htm>.

George Washington didn't have wooden teeth: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/smart-news/george-washington-didnt-have-wooden-teeth-they-were-ivory-180953273/>.

Health links from the Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/virtualref.html#health>.  
Recommended Health & Medicine titles at New York Public Library: <http://www.nypl.org/weblinks/health>.

Video about New York Public Library planning to sell the Mid-Manhattan branch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxWzDRPHSqY>.

Yelp review of the NYPL Mid-Manhattan branch: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/new-york-public-library-mid-manhattan-library-new-york>.