

Developing online stories from our 'Museums of Madness'

By Gabrielle Murphy



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A COLLABORATION between the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria will shed new light on the lives of the thousands of people who lived and worked in state psychiatric institutions between 1870 and 1980.

Material objects can provide a wealth of information. A group of mismatching forks, a simply-hewn broom, a radio from which the volume knob has been removed, a collection of nightdresses, a 78 rpm record – such seemingly mundane items can open up important lines of historic enquiry, and ultimately enable real-life stories to be told.

The interdisciplinary collaboration of historians Professor Elizabeth Malcolm and Dr Dolly MacKinnon and curator Dr Nurin Veis and has resulted in a three-year \$149,000 Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant. The grant, which is funding the employment of expert research assistants Dr Anne Westmore and Dr Lee-Ann Monk, will put Museum Victoria’s Psychiatric Services Collection of over 1600 objects online for the first time. These objects have been sourced from Victoria’s now-closed mental hospitals, which, at their height in the early to mid 20th century, housed large self-contained and self-sustaining communities.

“We believe the Museum Victoria collection is one of the largest of its kind in the world,” Dr Veis said. “But

unfortunately we only have sketchy information about many of the objects and the stories that surround them. Working with historical researchers, who have specialist knowledge of Australian psychiatry, will bring a human element otherwise largely missing”.

Dr Veis, a senior curator of human biology and medicine at Museum Victoria, believes that funding of this kind is essential to build on work already started. “Only about 20 per cent of the Museum’s psychiatric collection is currently available online,” she said. “With this financial support, we’ll not only be able to put the whole collection online, but enhance it considerably by researching the objects thoroughly and telling the stories of the people who used them.”

Professor Malcolm, from the University of Melbourne’s School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, is an expert on the history of migration and mental health. She believes the importance of this project can’t be underestimated. “Not only will it throw light on the daily lives of patients and staff and the care offered in institutions now largely vanished, it will help promote a better informed public debate about this vital and contentious area of mental health policy,” she said.

Dr MacKinnon, a leading authority on the history of Australian psychiatric institutions, believes that

the interdisciplinary approach and professional exchange involved are essential to the project’s success. “Our partnership with Nurin Veis enables us to build on solid individual work and to go further collectively,” she said.

According to the researchers, former patients have come forward to speak about their memories of everyday hospital life. “Intriguing and sometimes puzzling objects from the Museum’s collection, like record players and sports equipment, provided ready prompts for the recovery of stories not usually told,” Dr MacKinnon said.

Putting such an internationally significant collection online will not only make a valuable research resource available to the widest possible audience, it will also contribute to ongoing public debate. Offering new insights into past psychiatric care, research of this kind provides an important context for current discussion about the relative merits of institutional versus community-based care.

See: www.museumvictoria.com.au/collections/themes/1587/psychiatric-services-collection

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Photo: China bowl from Kew Lunatic Asylum, circa 1910. Image courtesy of Museum Victoria.