

'Hospital records in the National Archives of Ireland'

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The following article provides a general overview of the holdings of the National Archives of Ireland – hereafter NAI – in respect of hospital records and collections of medical interest. The NAI has acquired over the years, many collections of hospital records relating to both defunct and existing institutions. Many of these were accessioned through the Business Records Survey which operated under the auspices of the Irish Manuscripts Commission between 1970 and 1993 and was thereafter incorporated into the NAI.

Main collections

The most comprehensive collection of hospital records in the NAI is that of the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin (DUB 22). Described by one academic as the greatest collection of maternity hospital records in the world, the archives begin in 1745 when Dr Bartholomew Mosse opened his first lying-in hospital in George's Lane off South Great Georges Street and predate the construction in 1757 of the present hospital building. There is a substantial survival of material from the 18th century, including administrative records, operational records, account books, deeds and leases and loose documentation. The records are only available to those who have received authorisation from the hospital itself.

The records of the Coombe Hospital, Dublin (DUB 55) include minute books (1864–1938), auditor's reports and accounts from 1896, as well as some loose correspondence, while some old patient records are retained by the hospital itself. The NAI holds a small quantity of records relating to the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Dublin (DUB 54) which includes a complete series of operations registers (1887–1949) and a medical register for the period 1897–1902.

The records of St Columba's Mental Hospital, Sligo (SL 1184) were accessioned following the closure of that institution some years ago. This hospital was opened in 1855 and catered for the counties of Sligo and Leitrim. There is quite a substantial survival of records, including a fairly complete set of registers of admission dating from the opening of the hospital and some patient casebooks from 1892. The latter record staff interviews with patients, together with notes on their condition, providing a precious and valuable insight into the human psyche. Those wishing to consult these records must obtain authorisation from the Health Service Executive.

The records of St John's Hospital (97/40), the old Sligo county home, were transferred to the NAI when that institution was demolished in the 1990s. They include three indoor registers relating to admissions and discharges to the county hospital for the period 1930–1942 and a complete run of registers of deaths in the county home from 1934. There is a complete run of indoor registers relating to the Sligo workhouse and its successor, the county home (1910–1987) which gives details of persons admitted which often include reference to their medical condition. The collection also includes an indoor register relating to Tobercurry workhouse for the period 1911–1921.

The NAI holds some records of the Richmond District Lunatic Asylum, now St Brendan's Mental Hospital. This was the largest of the public mental hospitals established in the 19th century and catered for Dublin city and some of the surrounding counties. The records include a complete run of manuscript minute books (1815–1893), some printed minute books after 1900, a register of admissions, discharges and deaths (1846–1848), registers of admissions (1863–1877) and an incomplete run of registers of discharges and deaths from 1878. The bulk of the records of this institution remain in the hospital and include the remainder of the admission and discharge books, which together constitute a complete run from 1814 to the late 20th century, a marvellous run of casebooks – many with photographs of patients from about 1880 – and a very large collection of committal forms dating from the 1820s.

The NAI holds the records of the Board of Control which had general control of the district asylums in addition to records relating to the Office of Inspectors of Lunatic Asylums, the first of whom was appointed in January 1846. The first minute book of the Board of Control (999/784) covering the period 1817–1826, gives a valuable insight into the beginnings of the mental health infrastructure in the early 19th century. The NAI also holds additional minutes from 1860–1898 but many of these are in poor condition and may not be immediately available for research purposes. The records of the Office of Inspectors of Lunatic Asylums (OLA) include an inspector's report book (1845–1854) and a fairly complete series of letter books (1848–1910), some of which are in poor condition.

In addition to a very large collection relating to the Meath Hospital, which includes a wide range of administrative and operational records from 1805 (2007/128), the NAI holds some interesting material relating to the drive against tuberculosis in Dublin from the 1940s consisting of registers of admissions and discharges for St Mary's Chest Hospital (1948–1965), Rialto Hospital (1953–1961) and a TB hospital surgical treatment register (1942–1950) (DUB 63). An important run of proceedings books relating to the tuberculosis section of Dublin Corporation forms another collection during the period 1945–1955 while manager's orders relating to the health services section (1955–1959) (2005/164) which give a great insight into the anti-tuberculosis measures initiated in the metropolis, can also be consulted in Bishop Street.

The hospital holdings of the NAI were greatly augmented in 2006 by the transfer of several collections of great interest from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, mainly relating to institutions which closed in the 1980s. We are very grateful to Ms Mary O'Doherty of the Mercer Library for her cooperation and assistance in relation to this transfer. The records include minutes of the Dublin House of Industry from 1772 and of the House of Industry Hospitals which later occupied the same site in Brunswick Street (2006/86).

A very large collection of 20th-century casebooks relating to these hospitals had been taken in by the NAI some years ago which includes minutes of the management committee of the Richmond Physical Society (1812–1838). The records of Monkstown Hospital (2006/96) comprise minute books (1877–1973), annual reports (1848–1985), a journal of the Rathdown Dispensary (1812–1823) and an account book of Rathdown Fever Hospital (1835–1874). The minute books of Mercer's Hospital (2006/97) run from 1736–1972 and the collection includes a variety of operational records from the 20th century.

The archives of the Royal City of Dublin Hospital, Baggot Street (2006/98) include minute books (1878–1965), as well as a substantial collection of administrative and operational records. The records of Jervis Street Hospital (2006/99) include 20th-century casebooks and theatre registers. The records of the old county infirmaries established by the Grand Juries in the late 18th century, have a very poor survival rate, which makes a minute book of Monaghan County Infirmary (1768–1857) (2006/100), of particular interest. Another unusual collection of great historical interest is that relating to the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland (2006/101). This body was set up with monies collected for Queen Victoria's jubilee and trained and supplied nurses throughout the country in cooperation with local district nursing associations. These records which begin in the late 19th century and run up to the 1960s include minutes, correspondence, reports and operational material.

The NAI also holds a small collection of records relating to the Lady Dudley Nursing Scheme. This body supplied nurses to some of the most remote and impoverished areas in the country and the records include a photographic album dating from the 1930s which shows many of the nurses and the buildings from which they were then operating. Included among the wide range of smaller accessions of medical interest are a copy recipe book against diseases dated 1775 (999/90), an account of the dispensary at Dundrum, county Dublin (1819) (M 4847) and papers relating to the amalgamation of St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, Lincoln Place, Dublin, with the National Eye and Ear Hospital in 1891–1892 (M5778). Other smaller and more unusual sources in the NAI for the history of medicine are discussed in more detail in my colleague Aideen Ireland's article in this journal.

The Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers

One of the most important sources for health and hospitals in the NAI are the Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (CSORP) whose office performed in 19th-century Ireland, many of the functions of the Home Office in England. The alphabetical indexes to the main series contain many references to hospitals. Prisoners' petitions survive from 1791 and the health of individuals is often specifically referred to in appeals for clemency. Another important series within the CSORP is the Convict Reference Files – some of which relate to the confinement of lunatics in prison and their subsequent transfer to lunatic asylums. The material covers the period 1843–1869.

Another important source of medical interest are penal records. Prisoners were given a medical examination on arrival in prison and detailed records of their health were kept while incarcerated. From about 1880 onwards, the files include photographs of persons sentenced to penal servitude. The NAI also holds registers of Fenian and Land League agitators arrested in the 1860s and the 1880s, which include much detail relating to the health of those imprisoned. The CSORP records include files relating to the appointment of prison doctors and papers relating to the imprisonment of suffragettes which give an insight into their treatment while in prison.

Cholera Papers and Poor Law records

The Cholera Papers are an important source for chronicling epidemic disease in the 19th century. These contain applications for loans by local parish or district boards of health during the cholera epidemic of 1832. The application forms for assistance are arranged by county and often contain details of local economic conditions and information regarding the spread of the disease in a particular locality as well as arrangements made for hospital care of victims. The papers – which run up to 1834 – also contain some correspondence regarding the progress of the disease.

The NAI holds several important collections of poor law records which contain much of medical interest. The poor law system was established in Ireland in the late 1830s as an attempt to address the problem of widespread destitution. The country was divided into over a hundred poor law unions, each with a workhouse at its centre and was centrally controlled by the Poor Law Commissioners and later by the Local Government Board. A modern and centralised poor law system was increasingly utilised to implement new legislation – for example, it took over the old grand jury dispensaries in the 1850s and became increasingly responsible for sanitation and rural housing as the century progressed.

From the 1860s onwards, the workhouse hospitals became increasingly accessible to the general public. The minutes and other operational records of the poor law unions therefore contain much of interest relating to hospitals and medical matters. The orders dating from 1838 of the Poor Law Commissioners

survive as do those of its successors, the Local Government Board and the Department of Local Government and Health. Many of these orders – such as those relating to the appointment of midwives in dispensary districts – are of medical interest.

In general, the survival of the records of the poor law unions themselves are – with some exceptions – fairly poor outside the Dublin area and usually are confined to minute books. In Dublin, the old poor law administration was less radically modified in the early 20th century and the survival of records is therefore much greater.

The records of the North and South Dublin Unions (BG 78 and BG 79) which relate to Dublin city and the records of Rathdown Union (BG 137) which cover south County Dublin and north County Wicklow, include very complete runs of indoor registers giving details of persons entering the workhouse, as well as other operational records. The North and South Dublin Unions were amalgamated in 1918 into the Dublin Union and minutes of this successor body until 1943 and its indoor registers until 1938 are held in the NAI. All the indoor registers are available for consultation but application must be made to the Director of the NAI to consult the minutes for the period 1918–1943.

The NAI also holds some records of St Kevin's Hospital, the successor to the Dublin Union, including a fairly complete run of diagnostic registers for the period 1938–1953. The records of Rathdown Union (BG 137) constitute the largest and most representative collection of poor law records to survive in the country. The minute books run from 1839–1843, the indoor relief registers from 1841–1955 and there is a wide range of 19th and 20th century records relating to finance and relief. The collection also includes rural district council records which were responsible for sanitation and housing within their respective areas between 1899 and 1925.

Smaller collections of poor law records of medical interest include the Lismore Poor Law Union (BG 111) containing indoor registers (1906–1922) and an incomplete run of master's journals (1848–1916); Dromore West Poor Law Union (Sligo 8) which includes minute books on microfilm for the period 1916–1920; Castlecomer Poor Law Union (BG 57) which includes a register of births (1850–1859); Kilkenny Poor Law Union (BG 101) which includes a register of births (1899–1919) and a register of successful vaccinations against smallpox for Kilkenny no. 1 dispensary district (1880–1894) and Urlingford Union (BG 159) which includes vaccination registers for Johnstown district (1864–1899) and Baleen district (1898–September 1926).

Coroners' records

Initially transferred from the Crown and Peace offices in the 19th century and more recently from the county registrars offices, coroners' records are a useful source of medical information. Many of the earlier records were destroyed when the Public Record Office was blown up in 1922 but some 19th century coroners' records dating mainly from the 1880s are held in the NAI as are the Official Papers which include summary coroners' returns, giving name of deceased, date of inquest and cause of death etc. Such data survives for most Irish counties between 1835 and 1837 and for the years 1857, 1873, 1875, 1876 and 1878 with less extensive returns from 1858 to 1863.

Twentieth-century coroners' records also survive, with some counties being better represented than others. The most complete set of coroners' records survive for Dublin city, namely the morgue registers for the period 1871–1933. These provide details of bodies brought to the morgue and subsequent inquests on them, in addition to registers of coroners' inquiries and coroners' registers from the 1890s. The former relate to cases – later called natural causes cases – where there was some initial enquiry into a death but it was later decided that an inquest was not necessary. The coroners' registers relate to deaths for which inquests were held and files on deaths survive from the 1930s. Many of the files contain postmortem reports on the deceased and all provide a unique insight into the circumstances of an individual's death, generally through a police report and depositions of witnesses. These records are available to the public.

Records of government departments

The records of various government departments held in the NAI contain much of medical and hospital interest. The Dáil Éireann Local Government files (DELG) cover the period 1919–1923, a turbulent and violent period of great financial crisis. Much of the material concerns the implementation of the union amalgamation schemes which radically overhauled the old poor law system – particularly in rural areas – and involved the wholesale closure of workhouses, fever hospitals and county infirmaries and the opening of county homes and county hospitals.

The files of the Department of the Taoiseach are particularly valuable in relation to health legislation and policy. There is a series of correspondence registers relating to the Department of Health and Local Government covering the period 1920–1947 and these registers summarise incoming correspondence from bodies such as county councils, boards of health and public assistance, urban district councils and mental hospital committees and relate to a wide range of health issues. When the Department of Health was set up in 1947, the health-related files of the old Department of Local Government and Health were transferred to it and were subsequently divided into seven main series. These are now in the NAI and run from the 1920s to c.1960. Each of the series is generally arranged alphabetically by county and also by subject.

The A series relates to the provision of institutional health care and includes files relating to hospitals – including voluntary hospitals – dispensaries and children’s homes etc. The B series concerns food and drugs administration and relates to such topics as the control of infectious diseases – whooping cough, smallpox, polio, enteric fever, measles, diphtheria, venereal disease etc – pest control measures, disinfestation schemes and monthly reports of county medical officers etc. The D series concerns the treatment of tuberculosis and includes such subjects as tuberculosis hospitals, dental schemes, returns of patients and hospital staffing etc. The H series concerns the construction of health premises such as hospitals, nursing homes, clinics and dispensaries.

The L series relates to psychiatric care and includes files regarding reports, legislation and mental handicap etc. The M series concerns the school medical service general scheme and includes reports on school premises, dispensary surveys, outdoor nursing and domiciliary midwifery services, child welfare services and infant mortality statistics etc. The S series concerns Department of Health personnel and includes such subjects as personnel recruitment for hospitals, rules of conduct, salaries, conditions of service and qualification requirements etc.

The NAI also holds substantial records relating to the Department of the Environment, one of the successor departments of the old Department of Local Government and Health. While many of these files are currently unavailable for research purposes as they are not fully listed, they relate to areas of medical and health interest including water and sewerage schemes, housing schemes, control of nuisances and closure of graveyards etc.

The records of the Office of Public Works include letter books relating to the construction of lunatic asylums between the years 1835–1849, as well as plans and drawings relating to many of these institutions.

Access

In general, records in the NAI containing medical information about individuals after 1900 are closed. Some collections such as those of the Rotunda Hospital or St Columba’s Mental Hospital in Sligo, are completely closed unless authorisation has been obtained from the institutions concerned. A form of undertaking regarding confidentiality may also have to be signed before access to the material can be granted. Coroners’ files are generally available. Any queries regarding the availability of medical records should be addressed to the Surveyor of Business Records, National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 8.

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