

# MEDICAL

# *Archives*



**Promoting Efficiency & Effectiveness**

**R**emember that task force on planning for the future direction for your health centre? The information was useful, but where is it? Does any member of the task force know where the records went?

Your health care region has been accused of misuse of public funds. Will you be able to quickly find the documents that will prove that these accusations are untrue?

As part of a fund-raising drive, your PR group has decided that it wants to show how your hospital has benefited the community over the last 20 years. Where can they find the historical information they need?

An archives and records management programme can help answer these questions; ensure that your organization's memory is retained; and contribute to developing an invaluable knowledge base.

Let us show you how...

# MEDICAL ARCHIVES

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## **Introduction**

This booklet has four purposes:

- to introduce archives management as an integral part of proper records keeping
- to discuss the importance of preserving permanently valuable archival records
- to outline some of the requirements for an archival program
- to provide information on where to obtain additional assistance

## **I Your Records and Their Management**

### **Records as Assets**

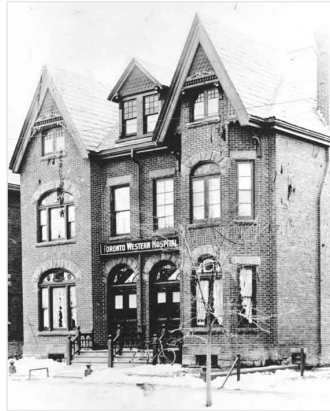
Records and the information they contain are valuable assets to any organization. They are used to :

- document transactions, decisions/and activities. They are also used as the basis for other transactions, future decisions and for new activities: “Why did we decide to purchase that particular brand of product?”
- establish legal precedents and establish rights and obligations: “Can we prove we own the land that our clinic is on?”
- develop public relations campaigns, advertising campaigns concerning changes in services, and for the celebration of historical events such as an important anniversary: “Do we still have a photograph of the laying of the cornerstone?”
- document specifications, research and innovative work: “Where are the original engineering drawings for the hospital extension built in 1980?”

### **Types of Records**

Every organization produces records in many physical forms, including paper, photographs, videos, blueprints, maps, drawings, sound recordings, and electronic information. There are two broad categories of records.

Administrative records document the routine activities carried out within any organization, and relate to personnel, finance, facilities, equipment and supplies. Examples of such records are vouchers, purchase orders, employee files, requisitions, invoices and receipts, equipment maintenance and repair logs, payroll information, etc. Few of these records need to be retained permanently.



*Toronto Western Hospital,  
393-395 Manning Street, ca. 1896,  
(University Health Network Archives,  
Toronto, TWH-11-4-1, Box 45)*

Operational records are those that document the core functions of an organization. These records reflect the way organizations develop and grow. They document essential activities, decisions, legal obligations and responsibilities. Many of these have long-term or permanent value. Examples of these records are policies and procedures, minutes of Board of Directors and important committees, records of assets, legal agreements, etc.



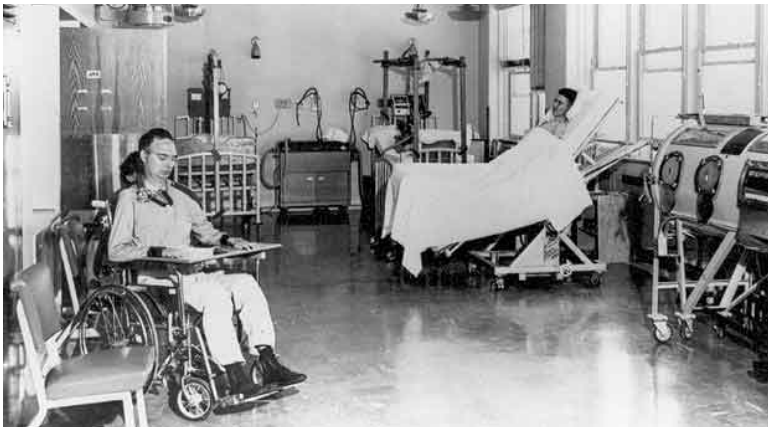
*County Hospital, Saint John Annual Picnic, 1947. (PANB, Bobby Styram Photographs, P96-5)*

## Record-keeping Systems

All information should be managed in an effective, efficient and secure manner. Every organization should maintain a filing system which:

- identifies the organization's records and their location, particularly those vital records whose existence will enable continued operation in the event of a disaster (fire, flood, etc.)
- classifies the information the records contain by subject or function, to allow for ease of retrieval
- controls access to records and monitors their use
- contains retention and disposal information for each record or group of records

All records have a life span or life cycle. Information is received or created, used and disposed of according to the needs of the organization that generates it. Most records can be destroyed when they are no longer needed for the purposes for which they were created, or for legislative or regulatory needs. However, a small percentage of records will have enduring value and should be transferred to an archive. The retention and disposal process must be completed in an authorized systematic manner as part of an established, documented business practice. Disposal should not be carried out haphazardly or without legal authorization.



*University Hospital: Polio Treatment Section, 1953. (University of Alberta Archives, 74-154-27)*

## **II The Value of Keeping Health/Hospital Archives**

### **Why should a health organization have an archives?**

Why are health archives important? They are primarily important to the body that generates them. They record the history of the institution in two ways:

- by documenting changes in medical policies, ethics, practices and treatments, and
- by documenting the major decisions made by the organization (e.g. the management of its assets, personnel, finances, construction, planning processes, etc.)

There are two major types of hospital records. Patient or medical records are usually very well organized, because they are normally under the control of staff who have formal training in managing patient information, i.e. “the chart”. As well, retention periods for these records are usually legislated, meaning that they can be disposed of, in whole or in part, on a regular basis. The primary use of these records is to facilitate the immediate



*University Hospital: Pediatrics Wing, 1957, University of Alberta Archives, 74-154-52*





*Gym - Rehab & Physical Medicine, Toronto General Hospital, Gerard Wing., ca. 1958. (University Health Network Archives, Toronto, Acc. 0030, P1-13)*

treatment of the patient, but they may also be used in:  
the continuing care of the patient:

- as a source of epidemiological information to health researchers
- as a source of legal documentation in litigation
- as a source of administrative data for long-range planning (e.g. to follow trends in treatment; to determined costs, staffing requirements, etc.)

The second type of hospital documentation, corporate records, do not usually receive the same care and attention as patient information. Although a large percentage of these records (up to 95%) are of short-term value, the remainder can be very important. Minutes of the Board of Directors or Trustees may be required for the hospital accreditation process; personnel records are used to ensure that employee rights are protected (e.g. for pension eligibility); and financial records are used in budget preparation. Annual reports provide a concise look at the development of the institution. Any of these records may be called into use during litigation. These records can also be used as the basis for a history of a hospital's origins, life, and culture, and can greatly contribute to the study of the history of medicine.

### **Who uses these archives?**

Archival records are of primary importance to those within the institution which initially created and used them. They will be used by those in the legal, personnel and public relations departments, the Board of Directors and the medical staff. The policies, facts and figures the records contain can be quickly retrieved, and the reasons for decisions can be easily reviewed.



*University Hospital, Doctor, Nurse, patient, 1926  
(University of Alberta Archives, 69-97-602)*

Your archives may also be used by individuals outside the organization. Additionally, medical researchers, practitioners from other institutions, auditors, public health planners, sociologists, lawyers, genealogists, fund raisers, biographers, and alumnae organizations (if a teaching facility) will find this information useful. Local historians and others interested in social history, the history of technology and science, the history of nursing, and the history of teaching medicine can all benefit from access to these records.

Bearing in mind that records received or created by a publicly-funded health care facility may be subject to Access to information legislation, users may be anyone with a legitimate need to use the records.

### **Other Uses for Health Archives**

Records within health archives allow their users to understand the operation of the institution. They also serve to inform users about other bodies, issues, and individuals. The clinic or hospital may have been established by a public body, and thus its archives provide insight into the development of social policy.

The records of a religious hospital may be used to study the history and activities of the founding church or order. The archives of a hospital under the direction of a charitable agency can hold valuable information about that body. One hospital may have had reciprocal agreements with other hospitals, or an association with an educational institution or a clinic. Part of the history of these other organizations thus is available within the your archives. Health archives may also serve as a repository for the personal papers of physicians or nurses.

All health-related organizations are a vital part of the community in which they exist. People often develop a strong attachment to the building in which they or their children were born; where they were ill and recovered; and where friends or family have died. The interaction between the hospital/clinic and the community is documented in records relating to fund-raising drives; volunteer activities; and the provision of secondary services such as grief counseling.



*Spastic Child Reading, Children's Hospital, Vancouver, 1949. (B.C. Archives, I-00477)*

### **III Why Do You Need an Archivist?**

Archivists are knowledge-management professionals. They have specialized training in both making the most of and protecting your information assets. They manage permanently valuable records by:

- appraising records with the help of those who originally received, created and/or used them. This process identifies which records have long term value, and allows for their transfer to the archives.
- arranging and describing these selected records in order to allow efficient and effective access and retrieval
- preserving records and applying conservation techniques to those which are damaged or deteriorating
- providing expert advice on the care and management of specialized media, e.g. electronic records
- providing assistance to a variety of researchers who wish to make use of records in many different ways
- meeting legal obligations in areas such as copyright, patent protection and privacy and freedom of information



*Medical checkup, Lumby School, North Okanagan, 1945. (B.C. Archives, I-00515)*



*Children being instructed in school work at Polio Clinic, ca. 1943. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Kingston Peninsula Historical Society Collection, P384-40)*

## **IV Establishing an Archival Programme**

Once your institution has decided to preserve its archival records, you must determine whether to establish your own archival programme, or to develop a contractual arrangement with an established archives for the preservation of your material.

### **An Internal Programme**

A successful archival programme needs a professional archivist and adequate financing for supplies, computer hardware and software, furnishings and space for storage and research.

Where does an archives fit into your organization? In the information management unit? The public relations branch? The legal department? The library? To flourish, archival programmes should be associated with the unit which can provide appropriate support, and where the records will be used to best advantage.

## Alternative Approaches

You may wish to donate or deposit your records with an established archives. A formal agreement can be drawn up to cover the provision of archival services such as appraisal, acquisition, arrangement and description, storage, retrieval and access. Some agreements cover records management as well as archival services. Donating records to an established archives usually means that ownership and control is transferred as well, but each agreement takes into account the needs of both the archives and the health care facility. This approach may be less expensive than establishing an internal programme, and could be a cost-effective solution to your information management needs.

Or, you may wish to partner with another hospital, clinic, or health care region. Such an arrangement might involve sharing facilities, professional staff and budgets. Costs could be shared equally or on a proportionate basis. Each institution would retain control over its own records.



*Laboratory of Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, Campbellton, N.B., 1927. Nurse Irvine, Dr. Felix Dumont, Sr. Shannon. (PANB, Les Religieuses Hospitalieres De Saint-Joseph Photographs, P24-11)*

## V Frequently Asked Questions

### ***How do I know if my organization needs an archival programme?***

Every organization creates permanently valuable records. They are worth being preserved and made available. Do you have control over these information assets? Do you have difficulty finding and using records? If so, then an archival programme is a necessity.

### ***Our hospital had a commemorative history written a few years ago. Why do we need to keep the old records any longer?***

While it is true that archival records should be used in producing histories, they are also used in on-going operations where historical knowledge is crucial to current and future planning and decision-making.

### ***Why do we need a professional archivist to do this work? We have retirees who know the institution very well. Why not use them to preserve our records?***

Volunteers and retirees can provide valuable assistance in preserving the memory of an organization, but they are not a substitute for dedicated professional staff whose job it is to establish and sustain the archival enterprise. When a director or manager wants information, she/he usually wants it immediately. A volunteer who is “not in this week” is not a substitute for an employee who is on the job. Likewise, a volunteer will be able to retrieve files, but may not understand the context in which they were created, accumulated or preserved. Archival management is information management. It requires professional skills and knowledge. Retirees from one part of the facility are not necessarily trained and experienced information management professionals. For example, doctors or nurses are not educated and trained as professional archivists, as archivists are not educated and trained as doctors or nurses.

***Why would researchers outside the hospital use our records?***

Archival records are most valuable when they are used. Health care facilities do not live in isolation from society. By making archival records available for research, these facilities demonstrate good citizenship and contribute to society's understanding of itself. This also contributes to the development of the institution's culture and public image.

***Should confidential records be preserved in an archives?***

Yes. Confidential records, even those which contain personal information, should be preserved in an archives. The important consideration is whether the information contained in the record is permanently valuable. If it is, then it should be preserved as an archival record. The archives will enforce access restrictions as part of its mandate. As time passes, the confidentiality of most of the records will diminish and the records can be made accessible.

***Are our records worth anything and will anyone be willing to buy them?***

Archival records of institutions are assets. Their value is determined by factors such as their potential research worth and completeness. However, most archival institutions do not have acquisition budgets to purchase archival records. Income tax credits are available for the donation of cultural property under certain circumstances. It is advisable to consult Revenue Canada or a local archives about this.

***Surely not all of our records are permanently valuable! We can't keep them all. How much material warrants permanent preservation?***

Not all records are permanently valuable. In fact, permanently valuable records constitute only between 5% and 10% of the records received or created by most organizations. However, some health care facilities may need to keep more records indefinitely because of government or legal requirements. A records survey and a quality records-scheduling process which includes archival appraisal will identify the permanently valuable records in your organization. Many mistakenly believe that archival



records are always 'old' records. The value of information does not depend on its age. Generally, the most important areas in your organization will produce the most important records.

***What costs will I incur if I establish an archival programme?***

Costs will vary depending on the volume, complexity and diversity of the archival record, and the size of the organization. In most instances, the costs are small relative to that of receiving, creating, using and storing other records. If records are efficiently managed throughout their life cycle by a trained professional, costs may actually be reduced. Valuable storage space is released through the destruction of non-archival records.

***How do other organizations use archives?***

Archival records are used in strategic planning, and in personnel and financial management. They are used for legal purposes. They are used for public relations and the marketing of goods and services. Archival records are used in training programmes designed to build or enhance a corporate or organizational culture. They are used to write commemorative and community histories. In fact, they are used in almost every aspect of daily work.

***Where can I get advice?***

Advice and assistance are readily available. Each province and territory has a provincial or territorial archives and a professional association of archivists or council of archival institutions. All are willing to assist. National institutions or organizations such as the Association of Canadian Archivists, the National Archives of Canada, the Canadian Council of Archives and the Association des archivistes du Quebec are willing to provide advice and support. Advice is also readily available from other health care archives. A list of other archives in your area is available from the organizations mentioned above.

## **VI Conclusion**

In an era when the rising costs of health care are a major concern, health care facilities are under pressure to operate as efficiently and cost effectively as possible. The establishment of a records management program and archives can provide significant cost savings to the institution, through reduction in space requirements, maximizing use of information resources, and elimination of duplication of effort. As well, Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation is now beginning to encompass hospital corporations. Staff must be able to respond to information requests in a timely and efficient manner.

Continued developments in the area of computer-based information systems also offer new challenges. Hospital administrators need to be able to take advantage of new technology, and to preserve information maintained on a wide variety of media. This requires someone with specific skills and training. An experienced archivist/records manager can ensure that valuable information resources are protected, preserved and accessible in the long term.

Finally, there can be no history without documentary evidence of the past. Biographers, historians, genealogists, sociologists, economists and many others use archival materials to analyze the past, understand the present and prepare for the future. The story of your institution is worth preserving and telling. Secure a place in the future for your organization—keep a record!

## **Appendix I**

### **National Associations and Councils**

Association des archivistes du Québec (AAQ)

C.P. 423

Sillery, QC

GIT 2R8

[www.archivistes.qc.ca](http://www.archivistes.qc.ca)

Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA)

P.O. Box/C.P. 2596

Station/Succursale D

Ottawa, ON

K1P 5W6

[www.archivists.ca](http://www.archivists.ca)

Canadian Council of Archives (CCA)

344, rue Wellington Street

Room/bureau 1009

Ottawa, ON

K1A 0N3

[www.cdncouncilarchives.ca](http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca)

## **Appendix II**

### **Sample mandate**

The mandate of the archives, as well as the duties and responsibilities of the archivist, should be set out in the form of a policy resolution adopted by the board of directors or governing body of the hospital.

The following is an example of the form that such an archives mandate might take:

#### **The Mission**

To acquire and make available those records and artifacts of (institution's name), as well as those of individuals and organizations associated with it, deemed to be of long term or permanent value, so as to preserve the corporate memory of the hospital.

#### **The Archivist**

The archivist will see to the administration of the archives and its staff, as well as actively participate in the management, disposition and preservation of the records, current and non-current, of (the institution's name). With regards to duties and responsibilities, the archivist will:

- systematically identify and acquire records of long term or permanent value
- assist management in determining the disposition of all records and co-ordinate the identification of materials of long term or permanent, and therefore archival, value
- prepare draft schedules for the disposition of records to be reviewed by the institution's committee in charge of records management
- serve as ex officio member of appropriate committees, including the institution's committee responsible for records management

- conduct of a survey of records, both active and non-active
- make archival records available for research by hospital staff and others
- oversee the arrangement and description of archival materials in accordance with professional archival standards
- ensure the preservation of archival materials through the implementation of appropriate conservation measures
- ensure the proper handling of archival materials among staff and researchers through periodic workshops
- make periodic presentations to hospital staff and others in the community to foster greater awareness of the archives, its function, and research uses
- conduct tours of the archives when appropriate
- prepare regular archival displays promoting the institution and its history as an integral part of the community
- co-ordinate an ongoing oral history programme

### **Records of archival value**

- founding documents or charters
- minutes, reports, resolutions, correspondence, and memoranda of the hospital's governing body and committees
- financial records and auditor's reports
- legal documents
- employee files
- bound documents and manuscripts, including correspondence, financial records, staff service records, etc.
- hospital publications, including annual reports, policy and procedure manuals, newsletter, brochures, etc.
- hospital and patient registers
- clinical summaries, casebooks, and case files
- photographs, albums, and photographic negatives
- speeches, correspondence (personal and professional), diaries, journals, notebooks, scrapbooks
- newspaper clippings
- news releases
- paintings, historical artifacts, instruments, equipment,

and memorabilia

- oral history audio tapes, and video tapes
- electronic records of long term or historic value

### **Where to get advice**

HHILS-CAN,  
the Historical Health Information Locator Service (Canada)  
<http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/research/ams/hilscan/>

National Archives of Canada/Archives nationales du Canada  
395 Wellington St. W., Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N3  
(613) 995-5138  
(613) 995-6274 (FAX)  
<http://www.archives.ca>

Canadian Archival Resources on the Internet -  
Medical/Health Archives  
<http://www.usask.ca/archives/car/medical.html>