Most students unknowingly pass the Dittrick Medical History Center, located in the Allen Memorial Library, on their way to and from the main quad. The medical museum is open to all university community members Monday through Friday during regular business hours.

Dittrick Medical History Center features new exhibits, upcoming events

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A few months ago, The Huffington Post dubbed Case Western Reserve University the "trendiest school that flies under the academic radar…but shouldn't." While this may apply on a broad scale, chances are it applies on the micro level, for there are outstanding university assets left unrecognized by many students, staff, and faculty members. Assets that fall under the radar, but shouldn't. Chief among these is the Dittrick Medical History Center.

The Dittrick has a long history, tracing its roots to 1898 when the Cleveland Medical Library Association formed a historical committee led by Dr. Dudley Peter Allen. Allen had been a renowned surgeon who researched and wrote about local medical history. His committee began to care for instruments and mementos donated to the association by Allen himself and fellow surgeon Gustav C. E. Weber.

President Robert E. Vinson of Western Reserve University played an active role in moving their collections to the campus area, and donated land at the corner of Adelbert Rd. and Euclid Ave. Now, more than 100 years after its inception, members of the CWRU community can find the medical history center on the third floor of the Allen Memorial Library.

Guided by chief curator and university faculty member James Edmonson, the museum has entered a new chapter comprised of recent gallery additions and a unique fall lecture series.

"People usually encounter the medical world when they are sick," Edmonson explained. "The gloomy experiences they often have colors perceptions of what medicine has to present. Medicine is a fascinating world and that is what we are trying to bring to the floor through our exhibits and lectures."

According to Edmonson, the days of the Dittrick serving as a museum for doctors has ended. The emerging focus is on medical issues to which all people within the university can relate. One way the museum is reaching this end is through the recently added contraception gallery features in the Percy Skuy Collection, which the medical center learned it would receive in 2004.

The Percy Skuy collection was originally located in Toronto, but after narrowing it down to three museums, Skuy chose the Dittrick as the collection's new home.

Skuy was previously president of Ortho Pharmaceutical (Canada), and assembled the world's most comprehensive collection of historical contraceptive devices. Following the arrival of the collection, the museum has expanded it to over 1100 artifacts depicting the history of contraception.

"The contraceptive collection is eye opening," Edmonson said. "In my experience, people don't understand how far back contraception goes."

Edmonson also explained that since the gallery's inception, more individuals have been coming to the museum.
"It's a real, worthwhile attention getter. It creates a form of engagement with the museum and the community," he said. "A lot of new audiences have come about through the acquisition of that collection."

In support of creating exhibits of universal interest, the medical history center will also be adding a complementary collection on the history of childbirth. However, the museum has a great deal of medical history to offer outside of birth control. One profoundly interesting display focuses on the history of anatomy at medical schools. Visitors can examine historical photos, postcards, and greeting cards depicting dissection in medical institutions.

The Dittrick also features a wide array of rare books. Examples include classics in anatomy, the Sigmund Freud collection, and the Darwin books and manuscripts.

In addition to providing unique exhibits for research and education, the Dittrick will also feature a fall lecture series to expand the conversation on medical history. On Oct. 27, Lisa Rosner, Ph.D. will deliver a lecture on the notorious murder case of William Burke and William Hare. The case, which took place 60 years before Jack the Ripper, involved the murders of 16 people, whose bodies were then sold to an anatomy lecturer. The lecture will investigate the questions that still remain in this almost 200-year-old mystery.

On Nov. 10, Mary Fissel, Ph.D. will explore the history of Aristotle’s Masterpiece, one of the most important medical books ever written. This influential text offered advice to women and served as a manual for sex and pregnancy for almost three centuries.

While more information about these lectures can be found on the Dittrick’s website, the medical museum is also open to visitors Monday through Friday during regular business hours. "We are friendly folk who are excited about the things we discover. We want to share these discoveries with our community," Edmonson concluded.