

# A body of knowledge: new exhibition at the RCP at Regent's Park

By **Katie Birkwood**, rare books and special collections librarian.

A new exhibition at the RCP at Regent's Park reveals the depth and breadth of 500 years of book collecting undertaken by the RCP and by its fellows and members.

## 500 years of book collecting

The RCP has maintained a library ever since its foundation in 1518. Built from generous donations of books and money, it reflects the interests and expertise of RCP members and fellows across the centuries.

But it has not all been plain sailing: the RCP library has faced many crises over its lifetime. It was almost completely destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, it stuttered through periods of neglect, embezzlement and homelessness – and it sustained bomb damage during World War II.

## 'Groundley lerned'

The books in the RCP Heritage Library reflect the wide interests of physicians of the past. They valued and wrote about a vast range of different topics – and they also read, studied and owned books about them. Rules for running the library published in 1660 specified that, aside from medical books, it should include works 'that pertain to Geometry, Geography, Cosmography, Astronomy, Music, Optics, Zoology, Physics, Mechanical Engineering, and Travel to the more remote regions of the earth'. In fact, the topics represented in the library extend well beyond those areas into literature, history and religion.

## Tools of the trade

Despite the wide interests of the physicians, medical education in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries was founded on key texts by a small number of ancient Greek, Roman and Arabic medical writers. Consequently, the Dorchester Library holds hundreds of texts by authors such as Hippocrates (5th–4th century BCE), Celsus (active 175–177) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina, c.980–1037), which formed the basis of the medical curriculum.

There were 17 works from the enormous output of the Roman author Galen (129–c.216) nominated as the set texts for the RCP licensing exam, during which examinees were required to demonstrate their in-

depth knowledge and understanding of Galenic theory. They supplemented this learning with newer works by contemporary theorists and illustrated anatomical treatises that brought the human body to life.

## Knowledge keepers

The content and character of the doctors' library largely reflects the society in which it was created – where wealthy, White, non-disabled, European men occupied a position of great privilege.

European colonial expansion was partly motivated by the search for natural resources that could become profitable crops and effective medical remedies. A consequence of this drive to increase medical knowledge was that indigenous peoples, and their knowledge of their environment, were exploited without acknowledgement. They were also presented to European audiences as ignorant or barbaric.

Because large-scale book ownership was costly, a market for cheaper medical books for lay people – including women – flourished. Printed in vernacular (local) languages rather than in Latin, these volumes were smaller and less sumptuous. They did not enter the doctors' library until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when collecting them became fashionable.

## Making the invisible visible

To accompany the main exhibition, an innovative new art installation in the Dorchester Library will for the first time reveal the contribution that women have made to the RCP's library.

In 'Making Visible', artist and historian Catherine James will carefully wrap hundreds of early printed books in conservation-grade paper, making a sweeping visual statement foregrounding the contribution of women hitherto overlooked in official histories.

This installation is one output from Catherine's ongoing doctoral research project 'Women's ownership of medical knowledge in Tudor and Stuart England, 1485–1714', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council via the London Arts and Humanities Partnership. During this project she has examined nearly 7,000 books from the Dorchester Library page by page, searching for evidence of their past owners and readers.

## The library today

Today, the Dorchester Library is a focal space in Denys Lasdun's acclaimed RCP building at Regent's Park, London. It is central to the RCP's ceremonial life, and its contents inform the work of students and researchers from around the world. Featuring an enthralling collection, spanning a wealth of subjects, it is an embodiment of the value that physicians have always placed on knowledge and learning.

RCP members and fellows worldwide can access clinical and professional development information, through ejournals, ebooks, databases and literature searching provided by the [RCP Library](#).

## In person and online

The exhibition will open at the RCP at Regent's Park on 10 September 2025, running until 23 July 2026. Normal opening hours are Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm, but anyone making a special trip to see it should check for any closure days [online in advance](#).

If you can't get to London to see 'A body of knowledge' in person, an online version will go live on the [RCP museum website](#) from 10 September 2025.

**This feature was produced for the August 2025 edition of [Commentary](#), the RCP's membership magazine. You can read a [web-based version](#), which includes images.**