



**HERITAGE
CENTRE**

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND

Collections Policy

September 2025

Contents

Background and collecting practices	3
Statement of type and quality of collections.....	4
Archives.....	4
Heritage Items.....	4
Medical Instruments and <i>materia medica</i>	5
Dun's Library	5
Statement of acquisition brief	7
Criteria governing acquisitions	7
Acquisition principles and procedures	9
Limitations on collection policy and acquisition brief	10
Archival and supporting documentation	11
Commitments and responsibilities in respect of collections.....	11

RCPI Heritage Centre Collections Policy

The purpose of this policy is to define the present state of the collections held by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI), and to clearly set out the policy regarding future acquisitions of material. It will ensure that material is accepted into the collections in accordance with an agreed collection development strategy and will serve as a guide to decision making by staff.

The strength of RCPI's collections is due to donations from organisations and individuals and this policy is intended to encourage public confidence in RCPI as a suitable and responsible repository, and to encourage future donations to the collections.

Background and collecting practices

RCPI was founded in 1654 at the Fraternity of Physicians of Trinity Hall, with the aim of improving standards of medical education in Ireland. Two Royal Charters, awarded in 1667 and 1692, created the College of Physicians and gave the new organisation the power to award licenses to practice medicine and midwifery in Ireland.

RCPI's corporate archive dates to 1667 and covers the history of the College from that date. From the nineteenth century onwards archival material relating to hospitals, medical societies and groups as well as the personal papers of physicians and medical historians have been deposited with RCPI for safe keeping.

In 1713 Sir Patrick Dun, former College President, died and left his library to the College. This forms the basis of RCPI's Dun's Library, which continued to develop as a working medical library for the next 250 years. In 2014 a strategic review of Dun's Library was undertaken to establish which material should be retained for its historic and research value.

In 1827 a committee was established to form a museum within the College. Although initially intended as a teaching museum for medical education it has developed over time to focus on the history of medicine. The object collections include both medical instruments and *materia medica*¹ specimens, as well as portraits, silverware and other non-medical items belonging to Irish doctors and patients. Over its existence, RCPI has collected items, including silverware, artworks and ceremonial regalia which form the core of the Heritage Items. These have been added to since the nineteenth century by purchased and donated items.

In 2010 RCPI's Heritage Centre was formed to bring together the various historical collections held in trust by the College. In 2018 the Heritage Centre achieved full Accreditation under the Heritage Council's Museum Standards Programme for Ireland.

¹ *Materia medica* is a term for the body of knowledge about the therapeutic properties of any substance used for healing.

Statement of type and quality of collections

The collections cared for by RCPI have been developed since 1667, while most are owned by RCPI there are some items on loan, detailed below. The collections are of national importance, with some items which are of international importance. For ease of management the collections are divided into the following categories.

Archives

Collected by RCPI since 1667, the archive contains unpublished material created by RCPI or donated to them. There is no chronological limitation on the archive collection.

Corporate archive

Comprising over 160 boxes of records created by RCPI since 1667. The majority dates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and documents the decisions of the Council and other Committees. Other records document the College's building, library, examinations, membership, the administration of Sir Patrick Dun's trust and relationships with other organisations.

Deposited archives

Comprising 50 collections and over 200 individual items donated to RCPI, filling over 350 boxes. These collections largely related to Irish hospitals, medical organisations, eminent physicians or medical historians. The records include administrative papers, patient registers and records, lecture and case notes, illustrations, correspondence, diaries and research papers. Materials date from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries.

The archives of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Ireland, the Royal Hospital Donnybrook and Clontarf Orthopaedic Hospital are held on loan by RCPI.

Heritage Items

Comprising works of art, furniture, medals, silverware, glassware, ceramics, textiles and other items commissioned by, or donated to, RCPI. The items relate to the history of RCPI, its ceremonies, Licentiates, Members and Fellows, and the wider medical community. The majority of the collection dates from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, with some

earlier and later items. There is no chronological limitations on the heritage items collection. The collection comprises over 2500 items.

There are 27 portraits and other heritage items on loan, most from the Apothecaries' Hall of Ireland.

Medical Instruments and *materia medica*

Comprising historical medical instruments and *materia medica* specimens and examples collected by RCPI since 1734. The collection includes examples used by notable Irish medics, as well as those showing changes in practices over time and the work of medical businesses. This collection also includes the material culture of the patients' experience in Ireland. The majority of the collection dates from the mid eighteenth to the mid twentieth centuries, with some later items, and comprises over 3,000 items.

There are 13 medical instruments on loan.

Dun's Library

Collected by RCPI between 1713 and the 1990s, this was the working medical library for the College. In 2014 a strategic review was undertaken to identify the sections of the library which were to be retained as part of the collections by RCPI. Dun's Library comprises c.20,000 items including books, journals, pamphlets and grey literature, in the following areas.

Core collections, c.1750-1900

This collection reflects the important developments which were taking place in medicine during this period, and Irish medics' place in the international culture of medical and scientific innovation and discovery. The collections also reflect the wider scientific, cultural, literary and artistic interest of medics.

Irish Medicine 1900-1950

A comprehensive collection of medical works published in Ireland, written by Irish medics, or with a strong Irish connection during this period. The collection reflects the development of Irish medicine in the first half of the twentieth century.

Special Collections

Donated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the collections formally belonged to important individuals or institutions.

The library of the Irish Cardiac Society, c.450 items, is on loan to RCPI.

Medical Directories and Registers

A comprehensive collection of directories and registers listing the names and qualifications of medics published between c.1840 and 2000.

Although not covered by this policy RCPI's Heritage Centre is also responsible for the management of the following collections:

- **History of Medicine Reference Library**, maintained to support research into the collections by RCPI staff and external researchers.
- **Handling collection**, un-accessioned items for use in demonstrations and handling during formal and informal learning and outreach events.
- **Antique furniture**, used to furnish RCPI's 6 Kildare Street building.
- **Modern artworks**, mainly used to furnish RCPI's corporate offices.

Statement of acquisition brief

RCPI is actively seeking to acquire items, physical and digital, relating to the history of RCPI², and the history of medicine and medical education in Ireland³.

Criteria governing acquisitions

1. Acquisitions will only be undertaken if the material has potential use(s) in research, display, engagement and/or learning, and meets the collection-specific criteria detailed below.
2. Except in exceptional circumstances acquisitions should not be undertaken if the material duplicates items already held in the collections.
3. The **corporate archive** is subject to collecting relating to the College's corporate activities and history. While much of this material will be created internally, Members and Fellows may have material which falls within this category.
4. The **deposited archives** are subject to collecting in the following area:
 - 4.1. Material from, or relating to, hospitals and other medical institutions in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
 - 4.2. Material from, or relating to, medical professional or public health organisations in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
 - 4.3. Material relating to medical education in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
 - 4.4. Professional and personal papers of Irish medics, or medics who have a strong association with Ireland, or who have practiced there.
 - 4.5. Material from, or relating to, medical businesses in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
 - 4.6. Material relating to the social history of medicine in Ireland, the ordinary person's experience of medicine, and material relating to medicine in the home.
This area has been identified as an area of weakness in the current holdings, which tend to be institutionally and professionally focused.

² In the context of this policy, and throughout this document, RCPI is taken to mean the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and its Faculties and Institutes.

³ In the context of this policy, and throughout this document, Ireland is taken to mean the whole island of Ireland.

- 4.7. Research papers of Irish medical historians, or historians who have researched into the history of medicine in Ireland.
- 4.8. Any format of material will be considered for donation to the archives in addition to documents including, but not limited to, photographs, prints, drawings, film, audio, slides and born digital material.
- 5. **Heritage Items** are currently being collected in the following areas
 - 5.1. Commissioned portraits of RCPI Presidents, or other figures in Irish medicine.
 - 5.2. Existing portraits representing figures in the history or current practice of medicine in Ireland or associated with the work of RCPI.
 - 5.3. Representations of physicians at work, or of RCPI's building and professional work.
 - 5.4. Representations of patients
 - 5.5. Commissioned items for the ceremonial use of RCPI.
 - 5.6. Non-medical objects relating or belonging to Irish doctors, or doctors with a strong Irish connection.
 - 5.7. Objects relating to the history of RCPI, the history of medicine or medical education in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
- 6. The **Medical Instrument and *Materia Medica* Collection** is subject to collecting in the following areas
 - 6.1. Medical instruments, equipment and clothing associated with RCPI's activities as a medical educational institution.
 - 6.2. Medical instruments, equipment and clothing associated with the history and development of medical practice in Ireland, or with a strong Irish connection.
 - 6.3. Medical instruments, equipment and clothing associated with important figures in the history of RCPI and/or the development of medicine in Ireland.
 - 6.4. *Materia medica* specimens, or related items, associated with RCPI's role in the regulation and classification of pharmacy in Ireland.
 - 6.5. *Materia medica* specimens, or related items, associated with the development of therapeutics or pharmacology in Ireland.
 - 6.6. Items relation to the formal and informal medical industry in Ireland.
 - 6.7. Material culture which documents patients' experience of hospital, institutional and home care in Ireland.

7. **Dun's Library** is a static historical collection, and as such is not a priority for collection. Volumes that fill gaps in the existing collection, have important provenance and/or copy specific information or replace damaged volumes may be considered. *We are actively collecting books on the history of medicine in Ireland as part of the History of Medicine Reference Library.*

Acquisition principles and procedures

1. RCPI recognises its responsibilities in acquiring material for the collections to ensure that care of the collections, documentation, and the use of the collections will meet the requirements of the Museum Standards Programme for Ireland.
2. The Keeper of Collections has authority and responsibility for accepting or declining potential gifts or bequests to RCPI, soliciting gifts of material for the collections and making recommendations and acting on the purchase of material in accordance with this policy.
3. In the case of acquisitions of large quantities of material, or high value items, the recommendations of the Keeper of Collection will be submitted to the RCPI Library and Heritage Committee and RCPI Executive for approval.
4. The Keeper of Collections will assess all objects left with the Heritage Centre as potential donation(s) to RCPI. The decision to accept or reject an offer of a donation is reached by considering the criteria laid out in this policy. Once a decision is reached the Keeper of Collections will contact the potential donor to inform them of the decision. Object(s) not acquired will be returned to the owner. Efforts will be made, with the permission of the donor, to locate an institution who may be a more suitable home and/or in a position to acquire the object(s).
5. RCPI ask all donors to sign a Donation Agreement, which transfers all rights and title they may have, including intellectual property rights, to RCPI.
6. RCPI will not acquire material(s) with any prohibitive preconditions or access embargos.
7. The acceptance of items on loan, for a finite period, may be authorised by the Keeper of Collections.

8. In exceptional circumstances privately owned object(s) of significant importance to the collection may be accepted on a finite long-term loan, no object(s) will be accepted on 'permanent loan'. The period of all loans will be agreed in writing between the Keeper of Collections and the owner. At the expiry of the term of the loan, it may be renewed for a further finite period.
9. Acquisitions outside the current stated policy will only be made in exceptional circumstances and after proper consideration by RCPI's Library and Heritage Committee and Executive, for example in an emergency situation where the preservation of the item(s) are at risk. Such material is acquired on the understanding that it may be transferred to another institution at a future time.

Limitations on collection policy and acquisition brief

1. Relevant legal frameworks will guide RCPI's practices in collections development, information, access and care, especially
 - 1.1. The General Data Protection Regulations and Acts
 - 1.2. The Human Tissues Act 2024
 - 1.3. The Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977, 1984 and 2015 and subsequent amendments.
2. RCPI does not intend to acquire any human remains, except in exceptional circumstances which would need to be approved by the Library and Heritage Committee and the Faculty of Pathology.
3. RCPI will consider the collection policies of other organisations collecting in the same or related areas. It will consult with these organisations where conflicts of interest may arise and/or to define areas of specialist interest, to ensure resources are not wasted and duplication avoided. Specific references will be made to the following organisations' policies.
 - 3.1. Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
 - 3.2. The Worth Library
4. RCPI will exercise due diligence and make every reasonable effort not to acquire any item unless they are satisfied that a valid title to the item in question can be acquired.

5. When an object is offered as a gift, in good faith, and the prospective donor is uncertain of the identity of the legal owner(s) and RCPI is unable to find this out as a result of its own reasonable efforts, the Keeper of Collections may accept the object, provided a permanent and detailed record of the circumstances and known facts is made at the time of acceptance.
6. The acquisitions of material will, to a certain extent, be determined by the availability of storage space.
7. RCPI may not be able to acquisition material in certain formats if it cannot provide appropriate storage facilities.

Archival and supporting documentation

1. The Heritage Centre will create a file for archival and supporting documentation for all new accessions. This will contain material relating to the provenance, history and condition of the item.
2. Over time additions may be made to these files, with records of conservation or research work carried out on the item(s).
3. These files will be accessible to researchers, although personal and financial information will be withheld.

Commitments and responsibilities in respect of collections.

The mission of the Heritage Centre is to develop, preserve, catalogue and make accessible RCPI's historic collections. This section articulates the principles on which the collections are documented, protected and made accessible. It acts as a summary for the policies which cover each area in more detail.

Documentation

1. The Heritage Centre acknowledges that the collection and management of information about the items within the collection is essential for all aspects of its work.
2. Documentation regarding the collections will be created and stored in compliance with the guidelines laid down by the Museum Standards Programme for Ireland.

3. The Heritage Centre prioritises the documentation of its collection, the strategic plan lays out how this it to be achieved.
4. Collection information will be stored in the collection management software and will be freely available online and in person.

Conservation

1. The Heritage Centre will strive to store and exhibit the collections in appropriate temperature, relative humidity and light levels, and in a pollution and pest-free environment that achieves a satisfactory balance between the long-term preservation of the collections, accessibility to staff and users, and other uses of the building.
2. The Heritage Centre will only employ trusted conservators, who are members of the Institute of Conservator-Restorers of Ireland, or another international accreditation body.

Security

1. The security and safety of the collection is a central responsibility of the Heritage Centre, with procedures in place to ensure the collections are secure at all times.

Access to the public

1. The Heritage Centre operates an open access policy to all its collections, except
 - 1.1. Where records contain personal information less than 100 years old
 - 1.2. Where records contain business information less than 30 years old
 - 1.3. Where the material is unprocessed, extremely fragile or otherwise unstable.
 - 1.4. Where a depositor has placed additional access restrictions on a collection.
2. Items from the collections will be made available to researchers by appointments. Access will be dependent on resource availability, staff time and space.
3. All users requiring physical access to the collections must complete a researcher's registration form and must abide by the stated access and handling procedures.
4. Where possible collections will be made available online.

Interpretation and display

1. The Heritage Centre is committed to providing interpretative display, both physical and virtual, based on its collections, and participating in events to promote access to the collections.
2. The Heritage Centre is also committed to the wider access to its collections through loans of items to other institutions for display and exhibition.

Research and Publication

1. The Heritage Centre is committed to making its collections accessible to researchers, and actively encourages dissemination of research through presentations, exhibitions and publications.
2. The Heritage Centre may request copies of data gleaned from research on its collections to be made available to future researchers, and for inclusion in the collection management database where appropriate.
3. The Heritage Centre will require a copy of all publications resulting in part or entirely from research on its collections.
4. The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland should be acknowledged in all outputs.
5. In providing permission to reproduce material the Heritage Centre does not assume any responsibility for infringement of copyright in the material which may be held by others. The publishers assume all responsibility for any claims made under copyright legislation.
6. The Heritage Centre will not support research that is deemed in its process or outputs to risk RCPI's reputation.