

## **Medical Records**

### **Treatments**

Before the 18th century, medical treatment was for most people a matter of traditional folk remedies supplied by popular healers (for example, wise or cunning women), although a number of professional surgeons existed from at least the 16th century and some charitable hospitals had been established in the Middle Ages. There was widespread acceptance of illness as divine judgement and, at a time of high mortality rates, an almost universal preoccupation with the possibility of death. Steps taken to avoid illness included the drinking of spa water, blood-letting, purges and emetics.

Medical science, thanks largely to the contributions made by universities such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, made huge advances in the 18th century, including inoculation against smallpox. Anaesthetics and antiseptic procedures allowed major operations to be performed in the 19th century, while the late 19th century saw the beginnings of the struggle against bacteria and sepsis.

The North Devon Record Office holds a number of documents relating to popular medicine. These include a recipe for plague medicine, c.17th century (ref. B9/18/37); various medical recipes, 17th to 19th century (ref. B264add2/25); prayer requests for the sick, 19th century (ref. 1000A/PI15); notes on north Devon customs and superstitions, 19th cent. (ref. B558), and a volume on diseases, 'The Seeing of Urines', 1548 (ref. 2309B/Z8/1-2). It also holds a volume on early surgical treatments, 'The Surgeon's Mate', by John Woodall, 1639 (ref. B37Z/7). Further details may be found in the North Devon Record Office subject index under MEDICINE.

### **Hospitals**

A number of charitable houses existed from the Middle Ages. The majority were in the form of chantries, wherein the residents prayed for the souls of their benefactors. Some housed the elderly and infirm; others served a specific purpose, such as leper hospitals. Most medieval charitable hospitals were closed down at the Reformation, though some private bequests continued afterwards.

In the 18th century, a growing population and developments in medical science led to the growth of the 'modern' hospital. By 1800 most large provincial towns had their own dispensaries and infirmaries; from the second half of the 19th century many of these were created from the sick wards of workhouses. Further advances in hospital provision came with the founding of the National Health Service in 1948.

The records of medieval charitable houses consist mainly of title deeds granting land for their use. Hospital records themselves may include minutes, reports, accounts, lists of patients, photographs, plans and correspondence. Trade directories, held by the Local Studies Library, will list the names of hospitals in each town or parish where they exist. The Record Office holds documents relating to various hospitals, including the Taddipport leper house, St. Margaret's leper hospital in Pilton and Mrs. Penn-Curzon's Hospital for First World War Officers at Watermouth Castle (ref. B210). Committee minutes are held for Bideford Hospital (ref. 2426) and Lynton (ref. 2426), Ilfracombe (ref. 2426) and Chulmleigh (ref. B703) Cottage Hospitals. Its most extensive records, however, are those of the North Devon Infirmary, 1824-1947 (refs. B292 and B405) and Alexandra Hospital, Barnstaple, 1902-1959 (refs. 3070 and

B405). Further hospital records can be found by consulting the North Devon Record Office subject index under MEDICINE: hospitals. Please note that personal records may be subject to a 100 year closure period.

## **Apothecaries and Pharmacists**

In the 18th and 19th centuries many towns established dispensaries, supported by voluntary donations, where the poor could go for treatment and medicine. Later in the 19th century modern pharmacies developed as business enterprises.

The North Devon Record Office holds prescription books for the following chemists: Barnstaple Pharmacy, 1881-1970 (refs. B111; B621), S.J. Buckle of Great Torrington, 1866-1947 (ref. B157), D.W. Turner of Holsworthy, 1919-1946 (ref. B299) and Boots the Chemist, Ilfracombe, 1926-1996 (ref. B483). Trade directories and census returns will also list local pharmacists. See the North Devon Record Office subject card index under BUSINESSES: chemist for additional material held.

## **Doctors**

Professional physicians, surgeons and apothecaries existed from at least the 16th century. Until the 18th century, training for these professions consisted largely of apprenticeship. However, Edinburgh University had for some time offered its own course in medicine, and by the late 18th century a number of provincial medical schools had also opened. This meant the development of a class of professionally-qualified doctors. In 1858, responsibility for medical education was vested in the General Medical Council.

The North Devon Record Office holds various parish records relating to locally-employed physicians and surgeons. These include appointments of surgeons in Northam, 18th to 19th century (ref. 1843A/PO4, 6); and a physician's account, Brushford, 1790-1791 (ref. 1094A/PO9). Apprenticeship indentures may also list those apprenticed to physicians, surgeons or apothecaries and may be found in parish overseers' and vestry papers or in borough records. Further details may be found by consulting the North Devon Record Office subject index under MEDICINE: doctors. Trade directories and census returns will also list local doctors.

## **Nursing Records**

The North Devon Record Office holds a selection of records relating to nursing. These include correspondence, reports, etc. concerning the Pilton district nurse, 1893-1948 (ref. 1239F/N1-73); accounts, rules, minutes, etc. for the Northam District Nursing Association, 1910-1944 (ref. 1843A/PG27-48); and the minutes of the Bratton Fleming District Nursing Association, 1937-1953 (ref. B18G/1).

## **Public Health**

Before the 19th century, public health, where it existed, was the responsibility of the individual parish or borough. From the early part of the century, however, Improvement Commissioners were set up in some towns to oversee public health and sanitation. Their work was taken over in the 1870s by Sanitary Authorities and Local Boards of Health. They were superseded respectively by Urban and Rural District Councils in 1894.

The North Devon Record Office holds parish burial registers, churchwardens' accounts and overseers' accounts, which may contain references to plagues and epidemics, as well as parish money paid to the sick. It also holds some records of Sanitary Authorities and Local

Boards of Health, as well as the following reports of local Medical Officers of Health: Devon County, 1920-1929 (ref. 1629A/PE10/2-5); Barnstaple, 1897, 1938-1946 (refs. 2654A/M4, 2654add2/C115-124, 126); and Ilfracombe, 1910-1949 (ref. 2458A/MO1-2). The North Devon Athenaeum holds reports for Barnstaple, 1886-1889, 1895, 1906-1935, as well as a report by the General Board of Health into sanitary conditions in the town in 1850. The North Devon Record Office also holds a report and extensive papers relating to post-war slum clearances in Barnstaple, including a large number of photographs of affected areas (refs. 2654; B1: B144).

Other holdings include a survey of the state of health in Bideford, c1870 (ref. B69/65); records of the Barnstaple & Bideford Port Health Authority, 1939-1989 (ref. B333); Bideford Rural District Council Health Department Reports, 1942-1943 (ref. B69add10/8); and the minutes of North Devon Community Health Council, 1985-2003 (ref. B129). For further details consult the North Devon Record Office index under MEDICINE: general.

## **Societies**

The North Devon Record Office's holdings for local medical societies include a report of the Exeter and West Counties Hospital Aid Society, 1945 (ref. 2426F/28), and the committee meetings minutes of the Barnstaple and North Devon Medical Book Club, 1839-1875 (ref. B334).

## **Coroners**

From 1194, the duty of coroners was to investigate unnatural, sudden and suspicious deaths as well as deaths in prison. They also heard appeals from felons and, after the Civil War, dealt with cases of treasure trove, although their status and functions had already begun to decline from the 14th century. In the Middle Ages coroners tended to be knights. However, from the end of the medieval period, most were elected by freeholders (property owners). From 1888, they were appointed directly by local authorities. Until 1926 all inquests were held before a grand jury; today they are held without a jury but in most cases are open to the public.

Coroners' inquest papers are subject to a 75 year closure period, unless written permission is obtained from the coroners to investigate, for example, the files of a relative. The North Devon Record Office holds inquest files, 1939-1955, and annual returns from 1862 for the Borough of Barnstaple (ref. 2151); records of the North & West Devon District Coroner from 1944 onwards are held by the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253. Local newspapers may also contain reports on particular cases. For older cases, the records of Assize Courts, held at the National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, may prove useful. The North Devon Record Office also holds some early coroners' inquests for Barnstaple, c.1735-1742 (ref. B1/532, 1948-1959, 3328).

## **Mental Health**

From at least the 16th century pauper lunatics tended to be housed in parish or union workhouses or simply given outdoor relief payments. The earliest asylums were simply private or charitable institutions. From 1815 the parish overseers were required to send lists of pauper lunatics to the local Quarter Sessions courts. An 1828 act empowered J.P.s to erect asylums from the county rates; in 1845 this became compulsory. In 1888 the responsibility for asylums passed to County and Borough Councils until 1948 and the establishment of the National Health Service.

The North Devon Record Office's holdings on mental health include a detention order for a lunatic, 1768 (ref. 1469A/PO151); and papers relating to Miss Harris, 'The Pickwell Lunatic', 1790-1791 (ref. 3704M/FC12-13, FC35, FZ21). Further details may be obtained by consulting

the North Devon Record Office subject index under MEDICINE: lunacy. Census returns will also list the inhabitants of local asylums, but frequently their initials only. Generally, there is a 100 year closure period on records relating to individuals.

### **Veterinary Surgeons**

The North Record Office holds accounts for Rawle and Matthews, veterinary surgeons of Rackenford, 1850-1863 (ref. 3058add4/23/1-2).

North Devon Record Office  
Library and Record Office  
Tuly Street  
Barnstaple  
EX31 1EL

Tel: 01271 318792

Email: [northdevon@swheritage.org.uk](mailto:northdevon@swheritage.org.uk)

Website: [www.swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives](http://www.swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives)

South West Heritage Trust is a charity and a company limited by guarantee registered in England.  
Registered office: Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, Somerset TA2 6SF  
Company number: 09053532 Charity Number: 1158791 VAT Registration Number: 197221592