INSTRUMENTS OF HEALING,

KEYS TO THE PAST

For decades, they traveled from patient to patient in the black bags of Vermont physicians; now row upon row of gleaming nickle-steel instruments sit in thin wooden drawers in the Medical History Room of the Dana Medical Library. Nearby are rows of medical texts from the 17th through 20th centuries. Across the UVM campus, more documents from the early days of the College of Medicine lie preserved on the shelves of UVM Libraries’ Special Collections, and in the University Archives. Here we showcase just a small sampling of the medical artifacts preserved at UVM. Those interested in seeing a piece of medical history first-hand should visit the Dana library to view its regular exhibits, or spend time by appointment in the Medical History room itself.

A Few examples still exist of the hand that helped to found the College of Medicine in 1812. The UVM archive holds this rare receipt for services rendered signed by Dr. John Pomeroy in 1808. Only four years earlier, Pomeroy had begun teaching medical students in his Burlington office and was appointed a lecturer in “surgery and physick” at the new university.

B Traveling surgeons of the 19th Century would have used these different-sized curettes to clean infected matter from wounds.

C In the days when a single doctor tended to a vast area of the rural landscape, a physician had to be prepared to practice a bit of dentistry along the way. Here, a wood and metal tooth key, used to extract larger teeth, that was carried by Vermont doctor Cornelius Harding Buck. D shows a related item, an upper bicuspuid tooth forceps.

D The forceps was an instrument once widely seen in delivery rooms, now seldom encountered. Above is an example of Hale’s Short Forceps, with their elaborately molded handles, just one of many examples of this instrument in the Dana collection.

E No relation to the College’s founder, the Pomeroy’s Ear Syringe is an example of the seemingly endless variations of instruments marketed by inventors in the 1800s and early 1900s.

F Ralk’s Gold Pessary was an early contraceptive device, a sort of 19th Century IUD, rendered in 14 karat gold.
It is an elegant-looking nickel-and-hard-rubber tool used for a less than delicate procedure. This mastoid mallet would have been used in conjunction with a chisel and gouge when operating on an infected mastoid bone, a common occurrence in the days before antibiotics.

Though they both look like similar antiques to modern-day eyes, these two microscopes in the Dana collection probably were manufactured at least 30 years apart. The oil lamp illuminated microscope at left could have been used in the 1880s or 1890s, and comes equipped with a finely-ground concave mirror for focusing the lamplight on top of a mounted specimen; the Leitz brass-and-steel microscope was one of the finest such machines available when it was used in the College’s old home at the corner of Prospect and Pearl Streets in the early 20th century.

Bearing all the signs of long use, this bone saw is just one of many found in the Dana collection of cased surgical instruments. The most notable is the box of surgical tools used by the pioneering physician and researcher William Beaumont, who trained in Burlington and St. Albans in the 1820s before setting out on a career that would see his groundbreaking discoveries in understanding the processes of digestion.

This kit of syringe and needles was owned by Ralph G. Perry, M.D., a graduate of the College of Medicine’s Class of 1901. Dr. Perry used this kit for years in his practice in Wells River, Vt.

Still intact and sterile in its glass vial filled with alcohol, these horse-hair sutures date from the early 1900s.

An early version of an instrument still manufactured today, this mastoid retractor dates from around 1906.
The University Archives contains several striking examples of elaborately engraved announcements of the commencement ceremonies for classes from the 1880s to early 1900s. Here, the card for 1884 shows two original building that made up Mary Fletcher Hospital, and the then-new quarters of the College of Medicine, in a converted mansion donated by the prominent citizen John Purple Howard. The ceremony took place in the Howard Opera House in Burlington.

Elizabeth Pingree's classmates in the College of Medicine wrote in their 1931 yearbook (now housed in Special Collections) “We must certainly acknowledge that Ping has zeal, enthusiasm, and perseverance to follow the course in medicine as she has done — she being the sole survivor of our original feminine trio.” Dr. Pingree, who hailed originally from White River Junction, used this Duromaster bag in the early 1930s. It included space in the upper compartment to store instruments, and a copper sterilizing tray that would be filled with water and placed on the kitchen stove when used by the doctor in the course of house calls. A cased mercury thermometer was also part of the standard kit.

Andreas Vesalius is often thought of as the founder of modern human anatomical study, and De corporis humani fabrica (On the Working of the Human Body) has long been considered as one of the most influential anatomical texts. Originally printed in 1543, the Dana collection includes an edition of the book printed in 1725.

Nearly four centuries after Vesalius made his observations, Vermont physician Layrie Morrison, M.D., was collecting his own. Dr. Morrison's physician's notebook, which resides in the University Libraries' Special Collections, contains an index to prescriptions for dozens of ailments, and detailed recipes for making them that the doctor collected from 1916 to 1941.

Frankel's nasal specula could not have been comforting when in use, but the delicacy of its construction is a testament to the instrument-maker's craft.

A traveling physician needed the right tools that took up the least space. This example of Smith's Folding Tongue Depressor was carried by Herbert Hanson, M.D., a graduate of the Class of 1899, as he made his rounds during World War I.