

SHORT COMMUNICATION


A Protracted Lockdown: The WHO Archives and Research on the History of International Public Health Today

Abstract

The WHO Archives in Geneva has been closed to researchers and the public since March 11, 2020. The Archives hold valuable, vast official correspondences, documents, photographs, and other kinds of dated records of the World Health Organization and related defunct establishments dating back to 1907. The closure of the archives became necessary in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic and the general lockdown that attended it. While normalcy has since returned in virtually every institution and sector across the globe, the closure of the WHO Archives has continued unbroken for over 2 years and 4 months with grave implications for research and scholarship on the history of international public health. This essay is a critique of that protracted closure which is now clearly unnecessary and unjustifiable. It is also a call for an urgent end to it in the interest of the fundamental right of access to information, and knowledge production.

Key words: World Health Organization, Archives, History of Medicine, COVID-19

Received: 19 Jul 2022; Accepted: 8 Oct 2022; Online published: 25 Nov 2022
Research on History of Medicine/ 2022 Nov; 11(4): 291-294.

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Citation:

Williams S. A Protracted Lockdown: The WHO Archives and Research on the History of International Public Health Today. *Res Hist Med.* 2022; 11(4): 291-294.



The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available. Everything an archivist does is concentrated on this dual objective. (Schellenberg, 1956, p. 224.)

Introduction

The centrality of the archive to the historian and his craft can hardly be over-emphasised. Indeed, in recognition of its importance to the discipline, some authors have described history as the “cult of the archive” (Jordanova, 2000, p. 186; Steedman, 2001, p. x). Perhaps in no other subfield of history is the archive especially important to the researcher than the history of medicine, particularly in its transnational scope. This explains the indispensability of the archive of international organisations such as the World Health Organisation for researching health history across national boundaries. The WHO Archives holds vast official correspondences, reports, photographs, films, and other kinds of dated records of the World Health Organization and its predecessor establishments dating back to 1907. It is thus clear that a protracted closure of such an all-important archive would negatively impact the research and scholarship of numerous health historians across the globe.

Lockdown, Locked Up

It was lunchtime in the late-wintery weather of Wednesday, March 11, 2020. I was in the Geneva Graduate Institute’s Cafeteria experimenting with the unfamiliar taste of the plat du jour on my West African palate. I was barely halfway into the test when I got a rather unexpected e-mail notification on my phone. It was a response from a staff of the World Health Organization Archives, located just 1 kilometre from where I was seated. The mail would unsettle my schedule for the rest of the day, which was that my planned visit for the next day, Thursday, “must be postponed in the year.” And this was not going to be a unique development; the same indefinite postponement, the communication indicated, applied to all such researcher visits planned from that moment till April 15, 2020. The delay resulted from the “new restrictions at [the] WHO headquarters due to COVID-19”. The sender did not forget to mention that the restrictions “will be reviewed and extended as necessary depending on how the situation evolves.”

Also, he stated that I would be updated on the development “as soon as possible.” It is now 2 years and 4 months, but there is no news yet of the reopening of the WHO Archives to researchers and the public. This state of affairs is very worrisome and lamentable.

It may be unnecessary to rehash details of the unprecedented strictures the Coronavirus Pandemic and the general lockdown that attended it brought on virtually every form of human endeavour in real terms. Even so, there can be no gainsaying that normalcy has since returned. As is the case across all sectors of society around the globe, nearly every university, research institution, repository, and archive have since resumed their regular activities. This is true of Geneva as it is in most parts of the earth. The varying degrees of access restrictions that were imposed owing to that terrible episode of public health disaster have, for the best part of a year, been lifted across the board. The same, however, cannot be said of the WHO Archives.

The establishment, which bears the mandate to “manage, preserve and provide appropriate access to the current and semi-active records and the historical archives of the World Health Organization (WHO),” has remained shut and off limits to visitors for far



too long. Consequently, and sadly so, research and scholarship about the past of this critical specialized agency of the United Nations and its activities have been hampered for many scholars and students of public health like me. For instance, a colleague and friend of mine, Oladayo Balogun, frequently laments that his thesis, which explores the history of the WHO in African geopolitics, is currently stalling due to the WHO Archives' protracted closure.

The WHO Archives is one of the several archives I planned to conduct a documentary search for my ongoing doctoral project, which examines the history of livestock capitalism and veterinary public health in Nigeria. Of its 10 main fonds, I am particularly interested in its "Archives of the Office International d'Hygiène Publique (OIHP)." The fonds is made up of documents and records of its long-defunct eponymous international organization, which was charged with overseeing international rules regarding the quarantining of ships and ports to prevent the spread of plague and cholera, and with administering other public health conventions. The Office, operative between 1907 and 1946 from its base in Paris, was charged with the administration of international sanitary conventions, the service of epidemiological intelligence, and the collection and dissemination to Member States of information of general public health importance. The fonds is mainly made up of maritime health certificates, deratting certificates, correspondence with countries concerning the 1907 Rome arrangement, administrative documents, etc. The health certificates are kept in paper form, making up some 30 linear centimetres of materials, while the administrative documents are on microfilm and constitute some 10 linear centimetres of materials.

Other equally essential fonds in the WHO Archives include Archives of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA): 1943-1946; Archives of the League of Nations, Health Section Files: 1933-1946; Archives of the Smallpox Eradication Programme: 1948-1986; Archives of the Parasitology Collection of the Communicable Diseases Documentation Centre at WHO Headquarters: 1911-2003; Photographic Archives: 1951-1994; WHO Media and Films Archives: 1953-1989; among others. Aside from these traditional paper documents, there is also a Special Collection comprising five main collections: stamp collection, numismatic collection, sound collection, oral history, and former staff history.

All of these wide-ranging troves of historical data have been kept under lock and key, away from the reach of historians and other medical and social science researchers, for the past 880 days. This closure sordidly brings to life "Derrida's evocative image of the archive as a site of "house arrest," one that ... suggests no entry for the wayward, no access to intruders," to use the words of Ann Stoler, the eminent American anthropologist and historian. (Stoler, 2009, p. 24) Something must now be done urgently to reverse the unfortunate situation.

As brilliantly captured by American archivist and archival theorist Theodore Schellenberg in the excerpt at the outset of this essay, without making records available and accessible for use, the archivist's work at preserving them is only half-accomplished. Canadian archivist and archival educator Barbara Craig has maintained that using the records "provides the ultimate justification for the archives." (Craig, 1991, p. 136) It is in access and utilization that the purpose of the archives is ultimately fulfilled. Hence, it behoves archivists to ensure that libraries are made accessible to the public while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners, and users. This is in tandem with the principles enunciated in the International Council on Archives' Univer-



sal Declaration on Archives.

While the fact is that there are major construction works currently going on within and around the premises of the WHO Headquarters, the reason adduced for the continued closure of the Archives, as stated on its website, remains “the restrictions ... due to COVID-19.” This ground and the actual closure are no longer tenable or acceptable. It is high time the WHO Archives be reopened to researchers in the interest of the fundamental right to information and for advancing scholarship and knowledge production on the transnational histories of health and medicine.



Figure 1. Image showing the WHO Headquarters in Geneva where the WHO Archives is housed. (The photo is taken by the author)



Conclusion

Up till the time, this article was written, and when the above image (Figure 1) was taken on July 7, 2022, the WHO Archives was still entirely closed to the public. It is noteworthy, however, that between then and the time of publishing, the reopening of the WHO Archives has been announced on its website, albeit with limited access. While the nature of the limitations is not clear, one can only hope that historians and other researchers of health and medicine will regain full access to the archives in no time. This is crucial for the continuous expansion of the boundaries of knowledge on the past medical of our world.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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