

Biennial Conference of the European Association of History of Medicine and Health: Health Beyond Medicine (Berlin, 26–29 August 2025)



Figure 1. Permanent exhibition at the Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité Campus Mitte, Rudolf Virchow collection of specimens.

Photo: Mojca Ramšak, 26. 8. 2025.

The biennial conference 2025 of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health, which took place from 25–29 August at Humboldt University in Berlin, brought together 270 participants from all continents to explore the theme of “health beyond medicine”. This meeting demonstrated how the history of medicine has evolved into an interdisciplinary enterprise that transcends traditional academic boundaries. Throughout the conference, participants were able to browse and purchase specialised publications in a dedicated book exhibition. The association awarded its prize for the best book in the field to Heidi Hausse

for “Malleable Body: Surgeons, Artisans, and Amputees in Early Modern Germany”, published by Manchester University Press in 2023. The conference location of Berlin proved to be fitting, as participants had the opportunity to visit the Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité Campus Mitte (*Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum*). There, they could explore the permanent exhibition “Tracing Life”, which spans 300 years of medical history and features wet and dry pathological-anatomical specimens. The opening reception was held in the former Rudolf Virchow lecture theatre, named after the 19th-century German pathologist and social reformer who declared that “medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale”. He believed that health is strongly influenced by social and economic conditions, and that addressing these social factors through political action is essential for public health. This venue connected participants to the material legacy of medical history, while Virchow’s vision of medicine as a social being resonated with the conference theme of health beyond medicine.

The central theme of the conference proved fruitful, encouraging scholars to examine health as a complex social phenomenon characterised by multiple actors, institutions, and processes that go beyond clinical medicine. Rather than focusing solely on doctors, hospitals, and medical theories, the presentations explored how health has been conceived, practised, and transformed through the actions of patients, communities, governments, and international organisations in different historical periods and geographical contexts.

One of the most notable aspects of the conference was the questioning of medical authority as the primary lens through which health and healing are understood. Many presentations explored patient activism and resistance, from grassroots medical organising among Polish Jews in the early twentieth century to mental health activism in Britain today. These studies have shown how patients and communities have created their own knowledge about health, often in opposition to or in conjunction with official medical discourse. The concept of lay epistemologies proved to be a productive framework for understanding how non-medical actors have shaped health practices throughout history.

The conference emphasised the interconnectedness of health care with broader social and political processes, reflecting the field’s increasing engagement with political and social history. Socialist healthcare systems took centre stage in several sessions. Scholars have examined how Eastern European countries, China, and other socialist states developed distinct approaches to healthcare that differed markedly from Western models. These studies revealed the complex relation-

ships between ideology, governance, and health policy, while also highlighting the transnational spread of medical knowledge across the Iron Curtain.

Colonial and postcolonial medicine received a great deal of attention. Presentations explored how health interventions served imperial projects but also provoked forms of local resistance and adaptation. These studies demonstrated the continued relevance of postcolonial approaches to the history of medicine, particularly in understanding how medical knowledge and practices were shaped by unequal power relations between different regions of the world. Another important topic was health diplomacy. Researchers analysed how international co-operation and competition in healthcare developed during the Cold War period.

Geographical and spatial dimensions of health were another important topic. The researchers investigated therapeutic landscapes that extended far beyond hospitals, including sanatoria, spas, and natural environments considered to possess healing properties. Particular attention was paid to urban health and the role of architecture in healing. Studies analysed how hospital design and urban planning were shaped by changing notions of health and illness. Border regions and migration emerged as crucial sites of health intervention and control, while environmental health approaches combined ecological concerns with human well-being in innovative ways.

The material dimensions of health practices received considerable attention throughout the conference. Medical waste and sustainability proved to be topical issues with deep historical roots. Several sessions explored how the transition to single-use medical equipment has changed both clinical practice and environmental policy. Standardisation processes in medical practice and global health showed how seemingly technical decisions have profound social and political implications. Diagnostic technologies and their social implications were explored across different historical periods, while pharmaceutical networks and the regulation of medicines revealed the complex relationships between national and international approaches to medical governance.

The conference looked in depth at how health practices construct and challenge different social categories. Gender and sexuality featured prominently in numerous sessions, from reproductive health policy to LGBTQ+ medical experiences, highlighting how medical knowledge has both reinforced and challenged existing social hierarchies. Disability studies approaches to medical history were well represented, offering new perspectives on how medical interventions have shaped experiences of disability and normality. Racial and ethnic categories in medical knowledge production were critically examined, while studies on chil-

dren and childhood showed how old age served as a particular site of medical intervention and social control.

Methodologically, the conference demonstrated increasing sophistication in the application of interdisciplinary approaches. Digital humanities methods, including topic modelling and data visualisation, were used to analyse large datasets of medical texts and records. Environmental history approaches to disease ecology offered new ways of understanding epidemic patterns and the spread of disease. Political ecology offered innovative perspectives on health inequalities, while anthropological methods enriched historical research with insights from ethnographic fieldwork.

The conference showed that the source base for medical-historical research is expanding. Visual sources, including photographs, films, and medical illustrations, were used to examine how medical knowledge was communicated and contested. Oral histories and patient narratives provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of health and illness, which are often not included in official medical records. Administrative records and policy documents shed light on the bureaucratic dimensions of healthcare, while material culture opened up new perspectives on historical healthcare practices.

The international focus of the conference was remarkable, as the presentations examined the dissemination of medical knowledge across national and cultural borders. Comparative studies revealed both similarities and differences in how different societies dealt with similar health challenges. Imperial networks and their role in the production of health knowledge were explored in different colonial contexts, while studies on international organisations showed the development of global health governance.

Above all, however, the conference demonstrated the links between historical analyses and current problems. Studies on pandemic preparedness drew on historical epidemiology to inform current policy debates. Research on health inequalities provided the historical context for current discussions on social justice and health equity. Environmental history approaches to climate change and health offered perspectives on one of the most pressing challenges of our time. Historical studies on medical sustainability and resource allocation have provided insights relevant to current debates on the financing and provision of healthcare services.

The strong representation of young scholars and non-European perspectives indicated positive trends towards intellectual renewal and global inclusivity in the field. These younger scholars brought new methodological approaches and research questions that promise to further expand the boundaries of medical his-

tory. The diversity of geographical focus, temporal scope, and methodological approaches points to a field that is increasingly secure in its theoretical foundations while remaining open to new analytical frameworks.

Looking to the future, the conference identified several research directions. A deeper engagement with environmental and sustainability issues emerged as a promising area for future research, linking the history of medicine with broader discussions on climate change and ecological crises. Continued methodological innovation through digital tools and interdisciplinary collaboration is likely to generate new insights into historical health practices. The conference demonstrated the potential for connections between historical analysis and contemporary health challenges, suggesting that medical historians are able to contribute to current debates on health equity, global health governance, and the social determinants of health and illness.

The EAHMH 2025 conference has shown that health beyond medicine is not just a conference theme, but a reconceptualisation of our understanding of health, healing, and medical knowledge throughout history. By expanding beyond traditional medical sources and perspectives, the field has opened new possibilities for understanding how health has been experienced, contested, and transformed in different times and places. This broader perspective promises to enrich both academic understanding and contemporary approaches to some of the pressing health challenges of our time.

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