

## Rare Book Collection Finds a New Home and Goes Digital



Dr. Spielman with research assistants, Sherri Aviczer and Kimia Kohanbash

NYU COLLEGE OF DENTISTRY maintains one of the largest collections of rare dental books in the world, including many prized first and second editions of historical texts. Yet, for many years, no one knew about this treasure trove, which Dr. Andrew I. Spielman, associate dean for academic affairs and professor of basic science and craniofacial biology, describes as having suffered from “benign neglect.” Now this collection, which had been stored in protective boxes at the Waldmann Dental Library, has been brought to light through a revitalization project led by Dr. Spielman.

It was the official closing of the Waldmann Dental Library on January 1, 2016 — the majority of whose holdings had long been digitized — that prompted Dr. Spielman to lead an initiative designed to shepherd the books to a new space for display. The collection, comprised of 931 volumes, now resides in a newly designed conference room on the 10th floor of the College of

Dentistry, the same floor which houses the Dean’s Office and Administrative Suite. Second-year DDS program students Kimia Kohanbash and Sherri Aviczer, volunteered to assist Dr. Spielman on this special project, which includes digitizing the books for inclusion in a virtual library.

“This book collection is not only remarkable in and of itself, but there is a remarkable story regarding how the dental school obtained it, as well as how I came to know about its existence,” says Dr. Spielman, who first became aware of this archive in 2005. It all began when Dr. Spielman came across an auction on eBay listing a 1728 first edition of Pierre Fauchard’s *Le Chirurgien Dentiste (The Surgeon Dentist)*. This prized publication described in great detail the dental treatment modalities for oral and dental conditions that existed in the early 18th century. It also established dentistry as a formal, independent profession and led to recognition

An illustration from one of the collection's rare books



of Pierre Fauchard as the “Father of Modern Dentistry.”

“I immediately called our dean at the time, Dr. Michael C. Alfano, who gave me the go-ahead to bid on the book,” says Dr. Spielman.

Dean Alfano advised Dr. Spielman to contact Mr. Van Afes, former director of the Waldmann Library, to fund the \$10,000 purchase from his budget.

“So I called Van, and told him, ‘I have good news and bad news for you. We are going to have a copy of Fauchard’s first edition. However, you are going to pay for it,’” says Dr. Spielman. “Van replied, ‘We already have all three editions in our collection.’ I nearly fell off my chair. I could not believe that we owned not only the 1728 first edition, but also the 1746 second edition and the 1786 third edition.”

There are only nine libraries in the world that own one or more of these three editions of *Le Chirurgien Dentiste*, and that includes the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and the Library of Congress. “The Bibliothèque Nationale has Fauchard’s actual handwritten manuscript with his notes, which is an amazing asset to have,” says Dr. Spielman, “but they don’t have second and third editions — nor does the British Library, nor the Library of Congress.”

The Fauchards and the other rare books in the College’s collection were a bequest from Dr. Bernhard W. Weinberger (1885–1960), a University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine graduate, an orthodontist, amateur historian, and member of the NYU dental faculty between 1923 and 1931. NYU Dentistry currently has in its

possession 931 titles from the 5,000 medical and dental books that comprised Dr. Weinberger’s collection. The original collection was slightly larger and over the years, a few rare books were given to the NYU School of Medicine.

“Weinberger set out to assemble a very deliberate and important collection of dental books,” explains Dr. Spielman. The collection at the dental school contains 6 books from the 16th century, 9 books from the 17th century, 111 books from the 18th century, 765 books from the 19th century, and the rest are from the early 20th century.”

The oldest book in the collection comes from Germany, a 1546 edition of *Artzney Buchlein*, written and published by Johann Dryander. Considered the first book devoted entirely to dentistry, *The Little Medicinal Book for All Kinds of Diseases and Infirmities of the Teeth* was first published in 1530 and includes homeopathy and folk remedies. It was written for barber-surgeons who treated the mouth, a group which provided rudimentary dental care during the Middle Ages, and it covered such topics as oral hygiene, tooth extraction, drilling of teeth, and the placement of gold fillings.

To assist with this project, Ms. Kohanbash and Ms. Aviczer began by inventorying the books, which are displayed in specially designed, securely locked cabinets. “The books are generally in excellent condition and the pictures of the instruments are either hand drawn or done with engraved plating,” says Ms. Kohanbash. “It’s amazing to be able to see these early dentistry instruments in such great detail.”

Adds Ms. Aviczer, “What excites

me about these books is that you can see all the different anomalies of different teeth and the development of malfunction, from the 1500s all the way through to today.”

The rare book collection is accessible by appointment only. Ms. Kohanbash and Ms. Aviczer, under Dr. Spielman’s supervision, will create a digital library, which will feature photos, stories, and various links related to the books and authors.

“We are going to have a lot more content within the digital platform,” says Ms. Aviczer, “such as the authors’ biographies and the books’ historical context, among other features.” The digital launch of the rare book collection not only will be a unique feature that distinguishes the NYU College of Dentistry from other dental schools, but it will also provide an important online service for practicing dentists, historians, and others interested in the subject matter.

“Some people might say, ‘Why bother with old books?’” says Dr. Spielman. “I would argue that old books represent our collective history and traditions. They provide the necessary context in which to appreciate the future. The great historian Jacob Burckhardt said of historical knowledge that it is not ‘to make us cleverer the next time, but wiser for all time.’” ■