Andreas Vesalius's influential anatomical work

Health Sciences Library Celebrates Historic Birthday and Acquisition

By Joelle Klein

The University of Colorado Health Sciences Library held a 500th birthday celebration in mid-November for Renaissance physician Andreas Vesalius, author of the groundbreaking anatomy book *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. The library has an original 1543 first edition and a 1555 second edition in its rare books collection.

In addition to celebrating Vesalius's birth, the library also touted its recent purchase of a 2014 English language translation of both editions of *Fabrica*. The acquisition was made from funds supplied by The Charley J. Smyth, MD, Endowment, established by the Anschutz’s Medical Campus Retired Faculty Association (RFA). The earlier original editions were donated to the library in the early 1960s and in 1982, respectively.

About 75 medical students, physicians, librarians, professors, and retired faculty members attended the Nov. 19 celebration, which included refreshments and a cake. William Arend, MD, Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the CU School of Medicine’s Division of Rheumatology, opened the event by recognizing Charley J. Smyth, MD, the former division chair of Rheumatology at CU, in whose honor the translation was purchased.

Attendees also heard a lecture on Vesalius's life and significance by CU Denver Associate Professor of History Gabriel Finkelstein, PhD.

Never heard of Vesalius? Unless you’re an expert on the history of early modern medicine, a Renaissance scholar, a student of anatomy, or a health sciences librarian, you’re not alone.

However, his contribution to medicine as the founder of modern anatomy is significant and the library’s possession of his rare books and the English translation of them were worthy of a celebration.

**Two-fer.** Gerald Perry, MLS, director of the Health Sciences Library, said the recent translation from Latin to English of both

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editions of the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* took two Northwestern University professors more than 20 years to complete. When he and other library staff members learned that the work was available, they agreed it would be a “terrific acquisition” for the library.

“It was the first translation to include both editions,” explained Perry. Acquiring it, he added, would be a way to honor and recognize Dr. Smyth as well as the RFA.

Seminal work. Born in 1514 into a family of physicians and pharmacists in Brussels, Vesalius studied medicine in Belgium, France, and Italy. He received a degree in dissection in 1537 and became a professor of dissection and surgery at Italy’s University of Padua. He attracted hundreds of students by performing his own dissections, which was not the practice at the time — in fact, it was forbidden by the Catholic Church in some parts of the world. Even more controversial, Vesalius’s anatomical findings ran counter to those recorded by Galen, the classical Greek medical authority.

Vesalius compiled his knowledge of human anatomy into *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, a large, beautiful, and expensive treatise illustrated with intricate woodblock prints. According to the Health Sciences Library blog, *Fabrica* was not the first anatomical work based on direct observation but its scope and quality made it hugely influential.

Vesalius dedicated the *Fabrica* to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and an abridged edition, the *Epitome*, to the Emperor’s son, Philip II of Spain.

Lasting influence. Finkelstein said that Vesalius was one of the three most important medical figures of the Renaissance, along with French surgeon Ambroise Paré, who discovered that ligating wounds produced better results than cauterizing them; and Paracelsus, a Swiss German physician, who discovered, most notably, the use of mercury as a treatment for syphilis.

Finkelstein also noted that in spite of the importance of Vesalius’s *Fabrica*, it was probably the less celebrated *Epitome* that had a greater effect on medicine because *Fabrica* was so expensive.

“What people read, historically, generally doesn’t survive because it’s usually a cheap newspaper or pamphlet. These get circulated a lot, and they eventually get read out of existence,” he said. “Vesalius is known for having produced this fabulous book that almost no one ever consulted.”

Medical revolutionary. While he challenges the importance of Vesalius’s greatest work, Finkelstein still believes that Vesalius revolutionized medicine.

“His real impact was on the teaching of medical students. He encouraged physicians and medical students to dissect for themselves and observe for themselves,” Finkelstein said.

Perry said there have been many subsequent editions of *Fabrica*, one published as recently as the 1930s, but the two early editions are of most interest because they are original editions created by Vesalius himself.
Vesalius died while returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1564.

The 500th Anniversary celebration was co-sponsored by the Anschutz Medical Campus Retired Faculty Association and the Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program, Center for Bioethics and Humanities.

Health Sciences Library rare materials are available to individuals or groups by appointment on Wednesday mornings and Thursday afternoons, or at other times by arrangement. To schedule an appointment, contact Emily Epstein, emily.epstein@ucdenver.edu or 303-724-2119.