

# Museums and Public Health: Is the Tewksbury Model Unique?

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The definition of “Museum” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “An institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.” The word comes to us via the Greek language describing the Muses, who inspired insight and understanding. The Latin definition of “museum” is “a place for learned occupation.” We all know museums as valued, even cherished public institutions known for their educational impact, sources of community and national identity and pride, and as generators of tourism and business for local economies. Many museums enjoy the trust of their communities as sources of information through years of engagement and many programs have translated science in ways that the public can understand and have helped to address misinformation through their displays and programs.

The role of museums in relation to health and public health is a lesser-known aspect of their capacities. While most people will readily understand a museum’s role in educating the public about health and wellness issues, they may not often think of museums as places that go beyond educating the public.

## Museums as Places to Help Patients

Art museums have worked with their local Alzheimer’s Association chapters with special tours for adults with memory loss using art to trigger memories. In some instances, museum staff have visited memory care residences to help people create their own works of art. Botanic gardens have used plant aromas and “feel” to help trigger memories to facilitate conversations. Others have used such programs to work with care providers to teach stress-reduction techniques. Art projects have also been used for children with autism to foster self-expression and communication. Museums have altered their hours so those with autism can attend before the museum becomes crowded and hectic. Others have changed the lighting and temperatures to make the environment more calming. These changes have helped parents as well, who can become defensive and apprehensive when their children behave in ways many others and other parents, not understanding the situation, express their disapproval of how the child is behaving. Other museums have had programs using tactile exhibits and multi-sensory verbal descriptions for people with low or no vision.

Some medical systems are experimenting with museum visits being prescribed as part of treatment. Britain had a “Museums on Prescription” experiment from 2015-2017. Patients were directed to a ten-week series of events in seven different museums. Activities included special group tours, interactive art-making workshops, and meetings/conversations with curators. Initial findings showed increased levels of well-being. Museums in Montreal and Belgium are also accepting doctor prescriptions for patient visits to special group sessions.

## Museums that Train Medical Professionals

Some museums are partnering with medical, nursing, and other health professional schools to use visual arts as training for accurately describing and interpreting what the students observe in the artwork. Other programs have clinicians-in-training come to museums to lead interactive programs with the public to give students experience with cross-cultural encounters and expose them to health and healing beliefs of people from different cultures and religions.



The US Botanic Garden hosts medical residents, pharmacy students and toxicology training fellows to learn about poisonous plants. They have since expanded this to include student groups, homeschooled children and anyone interested in herbalism.

### **Museums of Public Health**

What might be surprising is that there are very few, if any, museums like The Public Health Museum in the United States. While there are many museums with “medicine” and “health” in their titles, they are focused on clinical matters, specific diseases, and individual health. Indeed, there are also many museums that have health-related exhibits, but those connect with their primary focus, (eg, art, music, etc) rather than a focus on public health. An internet search revealed only one other museum in the United States with a focus solely on Public Health (David J. Sencer CDC Museum <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/index.htm>). Similarly, there is a museum in Dresden, Germany (the German Hygiene Museum, in Dresden [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_Hygiene\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Hygiene_Museum)) that focuses on the cultural and social contexts of health rather than the clinical aspect of diseases.

There once was a national museum in the United States that focused on public health. The American Museum of Health (AMH) borrowed heavily from the design and educational philosophy of the German Hygiene Museum. It focused on visual clarity and simple design. The German Hygiene Museum counted on its displays to create a sense of wonder from the visitors. The AMH opened in New York City as part of the 1939-1940 World’s Fair. It attracted the second-largest number of visitors (more than 12 million) of all the exhibits at the Fair. Its wild popularity during the year of the Fair filled its backers with optimism that it could find space in New York City and financial backing. This did not happen. The AMH sought to become part of the American Museum of Natural History, which had a major permanent exhibit about health in its Hall of Man. This “marriage” did not work. The AMNH scientists insisted that displays be scientifically accurate and should provide overwhelming amounts of information. Their sense was that this approach would result in visitors absorbing some of the information, which would translate into new behaviors. This clashed with the AMH philosophy of simplicity and clarity providing a sense of wonder leading to new insights and behaviors. In addition, the AMNH leadership was politically uneasy about displays that identified “upstream” social factors as risks for illness. Ultimately, the AMH lost its most significant financial backer and had to close in the 1950s. No similarly expansive museum has stepped into this void. Indeed, civic health education, with the power of group exposures and discussions, has increasingly relied on individual-focused methods as DVDs, websites, toys, and books.

The Public Health Museum in Tewksbury is virtually alone in the United States as an institution with a sole focus on public health promoting a population approach to educating the public about public health, disease prevention and disease control. It is following the German Hygiene Museum/American Museum of Health approach. It wears a proud yet weighty legacy as it sets an example and model for 21<sup>st</sup> century public health education.

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