

## Proposal: 'Soaking up the rays: the Reception of Light Therapeutics in Britain, c.1895-1939'

Currently I am a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University, undertaking a project entitled, 'Luminaries of *fin-de-siècle* France: aesthetic, scientific and medical cultures of light, c.1880-1930,' that explores intersections between French light aesthetics and light therapeutics. The further I have progressed with this project, the more I have come to realise that such intersections were not confined to France, and indeed that light therapeutics developed as an international field. The case of Britain is remarkable, and its early reception of light therapeutics offers a topic ripe for exploration. Niels Ryberg Finsen began experimenting with natural light in the early 1890s in Copenhagen, reporting successful results by 1893 for the treatment of smallpox with red light. His attention then turned to ultra-violet rays, which he directed onto patients with *lupus vulgaris*, tuberculosis of the skin. Finsen devised a massive machine to simulate UV rays, which passed through tubes aimed directly at the tubercular lesion. By 1899 his success so impressed Queen Alexandra (then the Princess of Wales and herself Danish) that she imported one of the machines and donated it to the Royal London Hospital, effectively creating what became known as the 'Light Department.' It was headed by Dr James H. Sequiera, who published an English translation of Finsen's *Phototherapy* in 1901.<sup>1</sup> The response of British physicians and citizens to Finsen's experiments and the frequency with which major medical journals reported on developments in light therapeutics – both natural (heliotherapy) and artificial (phototherapy) – has received only minor critical attention by medical historians (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2010; Carter 2007; Hobday 1999, 2006). Meanwhile the rich visual culture of light therapy, photographs, illustrations, advertisements, lamps, postcards and paintings, intriguingly remains unexplored, though the Wellcome Library and the Science Museum possess significant holdings of visual material and objects.

The visual material depicting and documenting light therapeutics must be contextualised as actively contributing to its early reception by the British medical profession and the public. Yet those images represent surprisingly diverse patient experiences and therapeutic procedures. Discomfort versus pleasure, modern technology versus ancient sun worship, and surveillance versus liberation emerge as complex themes in association with the reception of light therapeutics during its development as a cluster of new, supposedly 'natural' – yet technologically-advanced and highly-regimented – cures for the nation. As therapeutic practices, heliotherapy and phototherapy required strict medical supervision and mediation while simultaneously positing patients' experiences of those processes as an instinctual and even euphoric reverence of light. The project will explore how the diverse visual material and numerous medical articles and books legitimated, or even confounded, light therapeutics as valid medical practices during its emergent years in Britain. In private and public institutions, such as Treloar's hospital for children in Hampshire,<sup>2</sup> in open-air parks and lidos, in schools, at the coast, in hospitals, and at home light therapeutics were utilised for an incredible range of illnesses, both acute and chronic. From fanatics of naturism to eugenicists, like C.W. Saleeby and his 'Sunlight League,' who advocated sunlight as a means to racial health, interest in the miraculous curative benefits of light dominates early twentieth-century British medicine, both mainstream and alternative.

The Centre for the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick will be an excellent base for this work, with its strong research focus on natural therapies, eugenics, medicine and household technologies, and the visual culture of medicine. I plan to disseminate my research through articles in two major journals, *Social History of Medicine* and *Oxford Art Journal*, and as a book-length publication with an academic press. Another major aim is to hold an exhibition of books, visual material, and lamps and equipment relating to phototherapy and heliotherapy in Britain, c.1895-1939, on campus at the Mead Gallery or alternatively the Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum (Pump Rooms), aimed at the general public.

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<sup>1</sup> Its archives are preserved the Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum, and the original machine is held at the Science Museum's storage facility at Wroughton, along with other UV and infrared lamps and light 'baths.'

<sup>2</sup> Its main physician was Sir Henry Gauvain, an influential light therapist in Britain. The Wellcome Library holds a film of children receiving phototherapy at Treloar's, c.1928. Hospital Archives are located at the Hampshire Records Office (Hampshire County Council Museums and Archives) and the Wessex Film and Sound Archive, in Winchester.