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WHAT'S THE VALUE OF HISTORY?

**By Don Ivey, Manager
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What's the value of history? It's a question that I am often asked. Of what real relevance does history have in our lives today?

In today's down-sized, stressed-out, bottom-line world, it's a question worth asking. And the fact is, that history is of tremendous value and importance to all of us, everywhere. History isn't just a collection of meaningless dates on a calendar, and dusty old artifacts in cases. It produces a great deal of value and it does indeed serve both a useful and a practical purpose. In fact, if anything, we need more historical museums, libraries and archives in our country today than ever before.

First off, let's acknowledge the invaluable services places like the Center for the History of Family Medicine provide by housing historical materials. The successes of the present day, after all, are built upon the achievements of the past, and in no other field of human endeavor is this more apparent than in the field of medicine. In the case of the Center, it is the *only* historical repository dedicated solely to preserving and sharing the history of Family Medicine in the United. Each year, the Center helps family medicine organizations, physicians, educators, researchers and members of the public with queries on a wide of variety of issues and topics, the answers to which lie in no other place but the Center. That information has educated doctors, residents and students alike, saved both staff and management time and money by revealing best past practices (thus avoiding the dreaded "reinvention of the wheel"), and has even brought new knowledge, comfort or closure to physicians and members of the general public alike seeking to know more about a medical topic, program, or even a relative, colleague or friend.

History also touches us in other, more wide-ranging ways, but as these are so much a part of our lives now, we take them largely for granted. Examples of these are our many national holidays commemorating historical events and persons. Memorial Day, for example, pays tribute to all those service men and women who served our nation (among whom, it should be noted—in every war and conflict this country has ever been involved in—were general practitioners or family physicians); our nation's birthday is celebrated on July 4th, occasion of the adoption (not signing) of the Declaration of Independence; and Martin Luther King Day,

Thanksgiving, and a host of other holidays are all derived from historical events as well.

And, let's not forget about religious holidays such as Christmas and Hanukkah, which are also derived from historical events. In fact, all of the world's major philosophies and religions are grounded in history. And finally, what about all of the invaluable artifacts historical institutions collect, preserve and display: priceless documents like the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—the very cornerstones of our government? Or even our own family histories and genealogies, the stories of those who came before us? Where would any of this be without historical libraries, archives and museums to collect, preserve and share them?

So there is simply no escaping it—history and the study of history have profound meanings and implications in the lives of virtually everyone on this planet—even if you're not a history buff.

History is more—so much more—than just a collection of meaningless dates on a calendar and dusty old artifacts in cases. It is something very real and alive and meaningful to all of us. It is, in fact, one of the key things that helps to define us as a people, a nation, even as individuals and as human beings—for what ultimately separates us from the animals is *our sense of self and our collective sense of the past*.

So now, I ask you--what's the value of history?

Don Ivey is Manager of the Center for the History of Family Medicine (CHFM). Housed at AAFP headquarters and administered by the AAFP Foundation, the CHFM serves as the principal resource center for the collection, conservation, exhibition and study of materials relating to the history of Family Medicine in the United States. For more information on the Center, please contact Center staff via telephone at 1-800-274-223 (ext. 4420), via fax at (913) 906-6095, or via e-mail at chfm@aafp.org.