How does one realize history? How do they understand that it has hardly past, but it continues on into the present in bounds?

The Pam and Rolando Del Maestro William Osler Medical Students Essay Awards is one way. It saw me in the Archives of Ontario (AOO) and the Massey College Robinson Davies Library both doing original research on patient charts in the 19th century and recreating them using 19th century printing processes. Each work was individual. The first was archival, knee-deep in the microfiche, gloved so as to old, fragile ledgers. I sat among the lives of many. In between each chart, in each document chronicling the process of hospitalization, there were previous patients whose ills were forever unknown, physicians perplexed at the developing nature of disease, and there was a medical culture that is both eerily familiar and distant.

This mirror to the present became exceptionally clear as I charted the evolution of charts – from accountable measures to measuring accounting. A cold displacement became evident in the forms. Physicians no longer shared the unknown. They seemed omniscient. Curiosity was irrelevant, prognosis a matter of fact. Only what they said ruled. I thought back to my classes, to my general uncertainty, to the fact that I still did not know which profession I wanted to enter exactly. How could anyone know so much at a time of so little knowing?

Fittingly, I was not sure. But I tried to find out. This led to the second part of the project – the recreation of the culmination of this scientific certainty, the Queen West Index Card. Originally tied to further research not contained in this essay due to word limitation (archival work at St Michael’s Hospital, Women’s College Hospital, and Toronto General Hospital), I needed to see how this culture fitted on the form, and ultimately, how this form required this culture. Without one, the other could not exist.

It was dirty, sweaty work. Compared to the airy silence of the AOO, machines whirled, gears pounded, and ink splatted onto glass. Technicality became key. I needed to ensure each alignment was perfect, each element would work as a facsimile. Any immediate change would be too obvious, and so this art of traditions became not only industrious, but personally inspiring. Here I was, recreating a patient’s life, watching an entire medical society come back into existence with each type selected, each letter printed.

In this recreation, I myself became recreated. I realized how I wanted to be understood as a patient, how I wanted medicine to not only cure me, but see me as more than needing curing. I was whole already. Illness was just gaining more of this wholeness from an unique lens. It was special.

Such a proposition is not trite or inconsequential; rather, it looks at medicine as it was, how it came to be, and how it is created by the very forms at its core. These considerations remain relevant today, particularly as people like myself will enter practice. We must not only realize history, but make it, to change it, to recreate it by investigating how it is from what it was. This is the strength of the Osler Essay competition, and I thank you for the opportunity for it.