

THE VALUE OF HISTORICAL OSTEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS:  
CIRCULATORY HIP DISEASE AMONGST PHILADELPHIA'S  
BLOCKLEY ALMSHOUSE SKELETAL COLLECTION

THOMAS A. CRIST

Physical anthropologists depend on osteological collections to test and refine their analytical methods to more accurately diagnose paleopathologic lesions and, in the forensic context, identify undocumented human remains. The value of historical skeletal collections, however, extends to the documentation of unusual musculoskeletal disorders of interest not only to paleopathologists but physicians as well. In Philadelphia, thousands of human anatomical specimens in the Blockley Almshouse Skeletal Collection, dating from ca. 1834–1905, provide the opportunity to explore circulatory diseases of the proximal femur including femoral head necrosis, Legg-Calvé-Perthes Disease; and slipped femoral capital epiphysis (SFCE). Circulatory disorders during childhood development are under-represented in the archaeological record but are common today. Consequently, this review underscores the benefits of preserving and maintaining historical skeletal collections to document the untreated progression of these disorders, a rare opportunity typically unavailable in the modern clinical setting.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2006, three anthropologists from Utica College, a small college located in upstate New York, traveled with 12 students to the Institutul de Antropologie "Francisc I. Rainer" al Academiei Române to teach part of the school's annual forensic anthropology summer course using the Institute's extensive human osteology collection.

Unknown to most American anthropologists, the Rainer Institute houses one of the world's finest historical skeletal collections including over 6,800 modern crania collected by Romanian anatomist Francisc Josef Rainer (1874–1944), who founded the Institute in 1937 (Dumitrescu and Starcea-Craciun 2002). This was the first time that an American college conducted a course using this well-documented osteological collection, an assemblage that possesses great historical as well as anthropological value.