The information on the charts is as interesting as their design. They document the biggest health concerns of the time and also provide a brief lesson in medical history. The field of medicine has changed dramatically since the 1880s, so it’s worth comparing how illnesses were diagnosed then and how they are diagnosed today.

The charts employ terms that aren’t used anymore, and their categories include both familiar and unfamiliar conditions: miasmatic (caused by foul-smelling, poisonous vapor in the air, e.g., diphtheria and typhoid, also known as enteric, fever), “diarrhoeal,” septic, constitutional (e.g., tuberculosis), developmental, nervous (e.g., meningitis), circulatory, respiratory, digestive, accidents and negligence, and ill-defined or not specified—among others. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, the state’s five leading causes of death in 2010 were cancer, heart disease, unintentional injury, stroke, and chronic lower-respiratory disease.* In 1888, they were pneumonia, old age, tuberculosis, infantile debility, and diarrhea in children. Cancer appears in just a fraction of cases from 1888, for example, but it may have been lumped in with other causes of death, a result of misdiagnosis.

I can only speculate as to the charts’ use and how they got to MNHS. All appear to have been drafted by the same person, based on the handwriting, and to have hung on a wall, given the small holes in their centers. They may have served as easy visual guides to the most common fatal illnesses and conditions. I also imagine that someone on staff felt they were worth saving, based on their appearance, and knew that they should be preserved. Luckily for us, they were. The charts have been digitized and are available online through our library catalog: http://tinyurl.com/zv327uz

—Anjanette Schussler, government records assistant


**Visit the app to see all five charts.**
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