Mr Vin Chauhan, curator of Imperial College London’s pathology museum in Charing Cross Hospital, with one of the prized specimens: a uterus preserved from England’s first complete hysterectomy, done more than 100 years ago at the hospital.

DR BODY PARTS: Show & Tell

Collection of tissue samples can aid in study of pathology

ROW upon row of transparent containers line the shelves of a room in London’s Charing Cross Hospital, their contents suspended in the clear liquid like misshapen pink fruit.

What are actually on display are thousands of preserved tissue samples from any human body part and disease imaginable.

The marriage of art and science that is medicine is apparent at the pathology museum of Imperial College London, on the 11th floor of the East Wing block, where students and occasionally members of the public get to see first-hand how diseases affect the body.

The museum is not open to the public except by permission, but is usually frequented by medical students and personnel.

The facility is home to some 8,000 specimens, ranging from cancerous kidneys to eroded bones.

“The museum is both for teaching and research, showing us advances in medicine and changing medical ideas, culture and environment,” said its curator Vin Chauhan, a biomedical scientist with the university’s surgery and cancer department.

The rich collection could soon become a teaching tool for students at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, if an exchange programme with Imperial College London comes through.

Medical collections are a unique resource for supplementing the teaching of pathology – the study and diagnosis of disease through examining organs, tissues, bodily fluids and bodies.

The painstakingly collected and preserved samples tell the story of medicine from the 1800s. There are four pathology museums in London attached to various medical schools, said Mr Chauhan, but the Charing Cross facility is unique in that it is still used for hands-on work by present-day students.

Among the prized specimens is a uterus preserved from England’s first complete hysterectomy, done more than 100 years ago at the hospital, added Mr Chauhan, who has personally preserved about one-fifth of the collection.

Elaborating on his work, he said that samples are preserved for six weeks in a formalin solution before being dissected to expose the required tissue, and mounted by sewing them onto glass plates.

In some cases, dyes are injected to highlight specific vessels, or the flesh can be dissolved to show the network of bones.

“This is delicate work and a lot of care is needed to get the intended effect,” he said.

CHANG AI-LIEN