

An introduction to creative health

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There is growing evidence that arts and creativity have a role to play in both healthcare and population health. Incorporating arts into healthcare requires a shift in mindset from the traditional medical model of healthcare and structures and systems in place to support this transformation. This article provides an introduction to creative health. Through creative arts, there is an opportunity to improve individual and population health, reduce health inequalities and enrich communities. Creative arts can additionally support practitioner health and wellbeing. By providing an overview of the evidence base we hope that trainees will feel confident in recommending creative arts to their patients as well as understand how this can benefit their own wellbeing and that of the wider community around them. Links are given for those wanting to get involved.

Background to creative health

Making the case for creative health

There is now well established evidence that the arts are beneficial to our health and have a role to play in improving health and wellbeing (Fancourt et al., 2020; World Health Organization (WHO), 2019).

Medicine has been said to be both a science and an art – a phrase quoted by many of us as hopeful students at medical school interviews. Healthcare and arts were often intertwined in historic times. More recently our evidence-based practice has increasingly focused on clinical and pharmaceutical interventions. Many of us understand and appreciate the importance of a biopsychosocial approach to health; however, we often lack the time and means to fully

explore some of these aspects with patients in busy clinical practice.

The nation's health and care needs are changing. There is a higher prevalence of long-term health conditions due to various lifestyle factors, further impacted by increasing health inequalities. In response, a rising number of NHS organisations are combining traditional approaches – responding to illness where it occurs – with population health approaches that seek to better understand and prevent illness (NHS Confederation, 2023). In primary care in particular, the connection between arts and health could be considered holistically and in line with the WHO's definition of health not simply being considered as an absence of disease. Participation in arts can help people stay well, but may also be beneficial in the interpretation and recovery from illness. The human need for creative expression is intrinsic. In hard

times in particular, it may act as a soothing distraction while helping us understand and express strong emotions giving a sense of meaning and hope.

Healthcare is becoming more complex. As well as our evidence-based practice there is a need to understand healthcare from a values-based perspective – one that links science with people and understands individual needs wishes and preferences (Fulford, 2012). Creative health can help us develop clinical practice in terms of person-centred care, complexity and understanding the human dimension.

The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) states that creative health is fundamental to a healthy and prosperous society, and its benefits should be available and accessible to all. Creative health should form an integral part of a 21st-century health system.

What is creative health?

Creative health is defined as creative approaches and activities which have benefits for our health and wellbeing.

An RCGP special interest group is moving things forward within primary care. It has been set up by the NCCH to support and inspire GPs who have a special interest in creativity, and who advocate for creative health within general practice. See Box 1 for a summary of the aims of the NCCH.

Box 1. Aims of the NCCH GP special interest group.

Flourishing

Promote wellbeing through the arts for patients and clinicians

Transformation and culture change

Encourage holistic care and practices with reflection through the arts

Scholarship and practice

Build creative health evidence and strategy addressing all levels of primary care (education, patient care, intensive care beds, social prescribing, etc.)

Creative health may be a relatively new concept to most GP trainees as GPs, and other health professionals generally have not had any education on the benefits of non-medical interventions. Lack of knowledge about the benefits of engaging in arts, culture and community activities can be a barrier to referrals (Aughterson et al., 2020).

Increasingly perspectives are shifting and with growing awareness of the benefits of creative health there is the potential to transform the way we provide care and prescribe arts through social prescribing. Creative health offers us the potential to improve patient experience and create more sustainable methods of working whilst improving health outcomes for patients in an evidence-based way.

Involvement in creative arts can also help us understand our role as doctors and enrich our professional development. In an era of unprecedented pressure on UK general practice

the arts may have a role to play in our own wellbeing and helping us flourish.

Keys to this area are community partnerships and skilled artists who bring their experience and creativity. Arts can encompass visual arts such as painting, photography, crafts and sculpture, as well as music, singing, storytelling, poetry, dance, movement and performing arts. Other aspects such as nature-based creativity, gardening and connecting with the outdoor environment are also included as part of creative health.

Creative health may include art and music therapy which employ specific interventions, carried out by trained arts psychotherapists usually in mental health settings. The scope of creative health is much wider, however, and arts and creativity can be used in a variety of settings and ways. The role of the arts is not to replace conventional medical practice. Using creative health alongside medical interventions as part of clinical practice can provide a number of benefits to patients.

Case scenario: Arts boost

Arts Boost is a collaborative project designed to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through arts interventions at Hywel Dda University health board in West Wales. The programme is focused on teenagers with mild-to-moderate mental health conditions.

The project is run in partnership with the specialist CAMHS and health board Arts and Health Teams alongside three arts partners from West Wales; People Speak Up, Small World Theatre and SPAN.

The Arts Boost Project aims to improve mental wellbeing and has also provided valuable support for children young people being discharged from S-CAMHS by engaging them with their local art organisations.

After 3 years, Arts Boost continues to show great potential to improve well-being in CYP through arts engagement with improvements in SWEMWBS reported and Outcome Rating Scores. A wide range of arts activities have been offered with animation, aerial, journal creation, clay, paint, drawing and DJing. Induction, training and therapeutic support has also been provided for artists throughout.

'This is the only place I look forward to going to. Everyone is so nice it's so nice to be around people who understand me because my parents don't always understand, they don't understand what it's like to not want to be alive but here I feel like I can talk about anything'; Patient Story.

'These sessions focused around identity and different ways to express that. One of the great things about animation is that you can create your own worlds which you have control over and this can be really helpful for young people, and for anyone really'. Artist Gemma Green Home through SPAN arts

'Most people haven't tried aerial circus before they first come and everyone is on a level playing field and there is

something safe about that . . . The sessions had elements of aerial yoga and breathwork leading up to learning aerial circus skills and tricks higher up in the air. They can eventually go upside down and literally change their perspective.’ Aerial artist Jess Allen at Small world theatre

‘Art is the best way I can express myself. If it wasn’t for art I don’t think I would express myself as much as I do’ Participant Patient Story.

Evidence base

Physical benefits

The arts can provide physiological and physical benefits to patients, and there is ongoing work to investigate this outcome. Premature infants who listen to music are likely to gain weight faster and leave hospital sooner. Evidence shows that music has statistically significant and clinically important benefits for infants in intensive care settings (Standley, 2002).

Stress is associated with a number of health symptoms and chronic conditions. There is evidence to show that passive viewing of artworks reduces self-reported stress, as well as blood pressure measurements for participants (Law, 2021). In cancer patients, singing activities reduced biochemical markers of stress and modulated immune biochemistry (Fancourt, 2016). Using arts within our healthcare environments can help reduce anxiety, stress and pain with some studies demonstrating reduced hospital stays as a result (Boyce et al., 2018).

Singing has also been used to improve lung health for people diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and long COVID. Using breathing and vocal exercises aims to improve posture, lung function and breathing control while reducing anxiety (Lewis, 2021). Programmes have been shown to have potential to improve quality of life without causing significant side effects and patients consistently report that it helps them cope with their condition better (Lewis, 2016).

Dance activities are being used in neurorehabilitation and for patients with Parkinson’s disease and other chronic conditions including frailty. Dance can help improve strength, stamina, balance and reduce falls for patients while helping people build social connections. Dance has also been shown to improve cognitive function and memory in people living with dementia (Lloyd-Jones, 2019).

Some studies have shown that arts and culture engagement is protective against cognitive decline with a 44% reduction in the risk of dementia for people engaging with arts and culture every few months (Fancourt et al., 2018). Being engaged in activities is an important factor in quality of life for people living with dementia and participatory arts can have a number of physical, psychological and social benefits for this group (Cavalcanti Barroso et al., 2022). Green social prescribing supports people to spend time in natural environments and develop a connection to nature while building skills and being part of a community. There is well established

evidence to show that nature exposure benefits health and wellbeing (Mughal et al., 2022).

Psychological benefits

There is substantial evidence of improved quality of life and wellbeing across lifespan with arts and culture engagement. Frequent arts participation and cultural attendance is associated with lower levels of mental distress and higher levels of life satisfaction, with arts participation additionally associated with better mental health functioning (Wang et al., 2020). Recent systematic reviews have reported positive outcomes for mental health associated with green social prescribing (Cooper et al., 2022).

The arts can help improve self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-confidence and management of difficult emotions (Fancourt et al., 2020). The arts have also been shown to help us express fears, hopes and grief during difficult times (Bradbury et al., 2021).

Arts engagement can help prevent mental health problems, as well as manage stress and reduce anxiety. In young people in particular arts have been shown to help improve emotional regulation, attention and reduce social withdrawal (WHO, 2019). Using arts and creativity therapeutically may remove the stigma about mental ill health as well as provide coping skills for life (Smriti et al., 2022).

There are significant effects, for example, with singing groups improving postnatal depression (Fancourt and Perkins, 2018). Older adults have a lower risk of developing depression if they visit cultural venues every few months or more. Group participation (e.g. choir, dance, photography, theatre and music groups) is linked to greater life satisfaction and purpose and reduced loneliness (Social Biobehavioural Research Group, 2023). Art can help participants emotionally navigate the journey of illness and be a motivating factor in recovery (WHO, 2024).

Social benefits

Creative health has benefits to communities – building social cohesion, feelings of belonging and connectedness. Arts have benefits to physical and psychological health on a population level as we have seen. Through improving environments, reducing loneliness and social isolation and helping people feel self-empowered, creative arts can prevent illness by impacting the social determinants of health and reducing health inequalities (NCCH, 2023).

There are wider cultural benefits to arts and health including supporting a vibrant and diverse arts sector and promoting cultural identity and traditions. Social prescribing has been shown to be a cost-effective way of reducing demands on healthcare services and in several ways the arts may help us face challenges we face as a society with the creation of sustainable solutions. The arts can transcend difference and give perspective and meaning in ways that our healthcare services may otherwise struggle to express. The access to diverse perspectives provided by an artistic outlook may not only benefit patients, but also, assist in improvements in NHS organisational development and culture. The Arts can enable

community engagement and provide ways to bridge difference and promote health by bringing people together.

Evaluation

Defining and quantifying the benefits of creative health is challenging for a number of reasons. The ecosystem of creative health is complex with much variability in practice and settings. Outcomes such as improvements in mental wellbeing, social connectedness and improved quality of life are often highly subjective and difficult to define. Creative health through social prescribing aims for multifaceted and long term benefits which are likely to take time to reach fruition. Quantifying the 'ripple effects' created by an activity is, therefore, complicated due to the number of variables involved. Often qualitative information and stories of participants give powerful evidence of transformative effects which are difficult to demonstrate quantitatively.

Global, national and local context

Arts and health in practice

The arts in health programme is an important initiative for the WHO and a scoping review has been produced demonstrating the benefits. Arts can be used to communicate health promotion messages across cultural and political divides and help communities and populations learn and process experiences to improve wellbeing.

In the UK, a number of organisations and individuals are innovating in this area and the National Centre for creative health is establishing creative health associates and programme managers in each NHS region in England. The recent publication of the Creative Health review and work done by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Arts and Health aims to advance good practice and research, inform policy and promote collaboration.

In Wales, Arts and health coordinators have been established in each health board for some time following a memorandum of understanding between Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh NHS Confederation. The Welsh Arts and Health Wellbeing Network supports arts and health practitioners and is a membership network with a central role within several key partnership initiatives. Hywel dda healthboard in West Wales have established an Arts and Health Charter to help put creativity at the heart of healthcare in West Wales. The Charter is a public promise to integrate the arts into the work of the health board to improve health and wellbeing and promote healing and recovery. The Arts Council of Wales has also established a 'Cultural Cwtsh' creative wellbeing resource for health and social care workers. An arts culture and wellbeing network is also established in Scotland and in Northern Ireland the Arts Council supports organisations working in this area.

There are many grass-roots organisations across the country working to improve health through the arts. The passion, imagination and determination of individuals, organisations

and communities provide hope during challenging times for healthcare. Arts interventions are often low risk, cost effective, integrated and holistic treatment options for complex health challenges for which there are no current solutions (NCCH, 2023).

Staff wellbeing

Creative health has an important role to play in supporting carers- including improved wellbeing for health and social workers. Healthcare environments that are designed to be aesthetically appealing can have a positive impact on mood and stress levels of staff, as well as promote healing for patients. Structured programmes of creative activities have been used to help reduce stress and anxiety, build effective team support networks and encourage people to take a break from demanding work and prevent burnout. Using artistic methods, including symbols and metaphor to explore lived experience can support self-development through creative enquiry. Reflecting using creative mediums can help develop new ways of knowing thus enriching practice and offering an alternative to the traditional concept of resilience through flourishing (Younie and Swinglehurst, 2020).

Maybe you could consider if you have experience of creative arts and whether this has benefited you? In what ways could arts, nature and creativity benefit your patients and your own wellbeing? What organisations in your area could you connect with? See Box 2.

Box 2. Useful links.

NCCH/RCGP GP Special Interest Group for Creative Health

<https://ncch.org.uk/gp-sig-for-creative-health>

Wales Arts Health & Well-being Network

<https://wahwn.cymru>

Arts Culture Health Wellbeing network Scotland

<https://achws.org>

Arts, Health & Wellbeing in Northern Ireland

<https://ncch.org.uk/northern-ireland>

KEY POINTS

- Many GPs connect with a diverse range of artistic influences and have a naturally holistic outlook on patient care
- This can create a clear link to creative health and a desire to explore the potential further
- Learning about how effective the arts and creativity are in supporting health could improve care for patients

and transform the way we prescribe creative health through social prescribing

- Partnerships and thinking creatively are key and there are a number of ways that GPs and other clinicians can get involved

- The NCCH GP special interest group is one way to link with others and develop ideas around creative health

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