

CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PATIENTS' WELLBEING

Anita Holford explains how voluntary arts groups are an important resource for patients to manage long-term illnesses and improve self-esteem

Summary

Being involved in creative activity can have a powerful effect on people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. For people affected by long-term conditions, creative activities could form just as important a part of self-management as exercise or other pursuits. This need not always involve art therapy or arts in health projects because group creative activities are freely available through voluntary arts groups that exist in most communities. These also bring the important benefit of social connections, which increase wellbeing.

Keywords

Long-term conditions, arts and health, wellbeing

THE NEED for health professionals to find innovative and personalised solutions to patients' conditions, and the developing evidence base for arts and health would suggest that arts and creative activities could play a bigger part in primary care in the future. But with budget cuts looming, nurses and patients may find they need to look outside the health sector for this type of provision. The

solution may already exist, for free, in patients' communities. There is plenty of evidence to show how getting involved in a creative activity can affect people's wellbeing (Box 1). Search under 'arts' in the NHS evidence database (www.evidence.nhs.uk) and you will find more than 6,500 documents.

Direct, 'causal' evidence can be hard to find amongst the wealth of studies looking at 'softer' outcomes, such as improvements in confidence and feelings of wellbeing, but it does exist. For example, there is evidence to show that singing helps stroke patients to recover speech (Schlaug *et al* 2010) and that it can help to improve pulmonary function, symptoms of dementia, osteoarthritis, pain and sleep difficulties in older people (Skingley and Vella-Burrows 2010). There is also evidence to show that dance improves heart function (Belardinelli *et al* 2008).

However, these types of outcomes are not necessarily the most valuable, particularly in the case of long-term conditions. Research and evaluation in the field of arts and health is far more likely to look at improvements in areas such as motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, personal identity and socialisation. But far from being the softer outcomes as they are often described, they are shown to have deep and lasting effects, helping people not only adapt and respond to changes in their health, but even transform their attitudes to their conditions and their lives.

Much of this research uses evaluation techniques from the health sector to demonstrate these wider effects. For example, to look at activities aimed at reducing social isolation and encouraging creativity, Greaves and Farbus (2006) used the Geriatric Depression, SF12 Health Quality of Life and Medical

Box 1 The benefits of creative activities

Taking part in arts and creative activities can help people to:

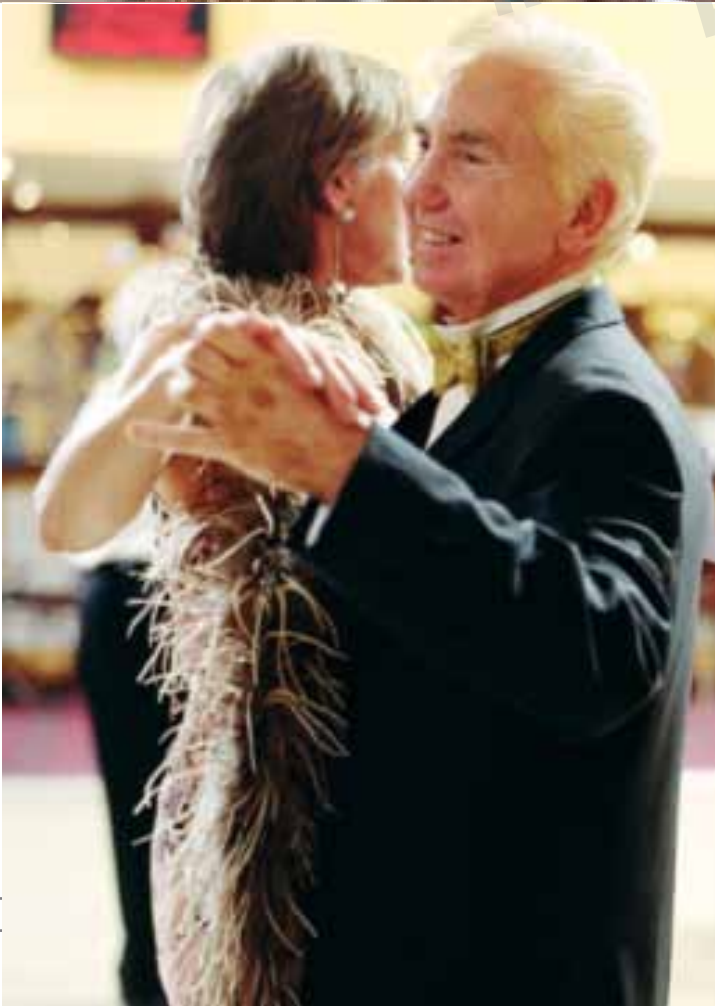
- Feel happier and more positive about themselves and their situations.
- Feel less isolated and more connected with other people and the outside world.
- Gain a sense of purpose and meaning, and to develop new interests and skills.
- Improve their self-confidence and self-esteem.

- Gain a sense of choice and control over their lives and daily activities.

- Improve their physical fitness, sensory awareness and physical dexterity.

In some cases, they have been shown to help people to:

- Reduce the number of visits people make to the GP or outpatients' clinic.
- Reduce the amount of medication they take, particularly anti-depressants.



Box 2 Five ways to wellbeing

The government's Foresight project asked a panel of 400 scientists to develop a long-term vision for maximising mental capital [Q: What does mental capital mean?] and wellbeing in the UK for the benefits of society and the individual. The panel concluded that there are five simple steps to maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing, all of which can be achieved by taking part in creative activities with voluntary arts groups:

- 1. Connect** – with the people around you
Connect with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours at home, work, school or in your local community. Think of them as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.
- 2. Be active** – take up a physical activity that you enjoy
Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.
- 3. Keep learning** – try something new or take up an old interest
Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.
- 4. Give** – Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you.
- 5. Take notice** – be curious, aware of what's around you and what you are feeling
Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

(Source: Aked *et al* 2008)

Outcomes Social Support scales. Researchers found significant improvements in the SF12 mental component and depression scores, and a marginally significant improvement in the SF12 physical component. Participants also reported increased alertness, social activity, self-worth, optimism about life and positive changes in health behaviour. Some even reported stronger, 'transformational' changes.

Another study (Secker *et al* 2007) looked at a number of mental health and arts projects using the clinical outcomes in routine evaluation (CORE) measures of mental health, amongst other methods. It found a statistically significant decrease in the use of health services by service users and improvements in empowerment, mental health and social inclusion.

Perhaps most importantly for health

practitioners, creative activities – particularly group activities – can contribute to personalised care and self-management. Tapping into people's individual creative interests can encourage them to participate, learn, and find meaning and purpose in their lives. In fact, they fulfil the 'Five ways to wellbeing', helping people to connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give (Box 2).

But it is not easy to integrate creative activities into nursing practice unless your trust has an established 'arts and health' programme. Even if patients have expressed interest in doing something creative and you are aware that this could benefit them, where would you go to find the evidence or discover what is available?

'Voluntary arts groups' could offer a solution (Box 3). Although they cannot replace targeted arts in health and arts therapy interventions, in conjunction with a new website that collates some of the research and provides signposts to activities, they could provide an alternative or even a sustainable 'next step' for patients.

Voluntary arts groups

Voluntary arts groups are open to all and run by local people for the benefit of their members and their community. They include groups for embroidery, dance, painting, crafts – ranging from beads and pottery to origami and batik – and drama associations, musical theatre societies, choirs, orchestras and many others. This means that they fit particularly well with the personalisation agenda. The Voluntary Arts Directory of Amateur Art and Craft Forms, published by Voluntary Arts, the development agency for voluntary arts groups, lists 68 different types of groups and artforms, from accordion to woodturning, and there are many more with thousands of local and national groups across the UK practising a variety of artforms.

Most are self-sustaining and free or low-cost to join. They also offer the added value of social connections because they are embedded in the local community and attract a wide range of participants.

Many are formally set up as charities, meaning they have to demonstrate and report on their public benefits, have responsible trustees, and have certain policies and practices in place for areas such as health and safety, protection of children and vulnerable adults, and risk management.

Voluntary arts link co-coordinator, Ginny Brink, who is also Macmillan development manager, south east Wales, believes that voluntary arts groups have a central role to play in the health and wellbeing of the nation, now more than ever before: 'long-term conditions in particular are

Case study

The North Bristol Wellbeing Choir was set up in 2008 as a short-term arts and health project by the Neighbourhood Arts Team of Bristol City Council. Initially, it was developed in partnership with local doctors' surgeries, which referred patients, but the choir is now an independent group that is open to anyone.

Hannah Currant, neighbourhood arts officer, Bristol North, Bristol City Council is convinced of the health benefits of the choir: 'A lot of the work that the choir does is around increasing lung capacity and getting the heart going, but it is a lot gentler and a lot more accessible to people than going to a gym. People go home and practise on their own and singing becomes part of a routine that they can use to help with their stress. Whatever their ailments are, singing can be applied in various different ways and can physically have a significant impact... Being part of something bigger than yourself is also important.'

Participants include people with serious health issues, such as angina, heart problems, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, stomach problems, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, back problems

and depression, as well as people with learning and physical disabilities.

There are now around 60 regular attendees and more than 100 other people who have come through since the choir began. People come from a range of very different backgrounds and have different reasons for joining. Some understand that it may help with their health issues. Others join for general wellbeing – to do something in a group and perhaps help with isolation or depression.

'It certainly can be seen as a success by the attendance and retention rates, and from the anecdotal evidence,' Ms Currant continues. 'We know members who have stopped taking antidepressants, have reduced or stopped other costly therapies in favour of the choir, and have decreased their visits to their GPs. It's been medically proven that singing together releases endorphins and makes people feel happier, and it certainly does that for a lot of the people who come along.'

Ms Currant describes how a young mother in her late teens joined when she was pregnant as she thought that it would help her with her pregnancy, breathing

and labour, among other things. Before she joined the choir, she was not very confident, suffered from depression and would never have performed. Now she feels calmer, her depression has lifted, she has sung solo in performances and has made many new friends.

'Another young girl came up to me after her second session, having just joined the choir,' says Ms Currant. 'She was quite a timid young woman, who was so delighted with the experience, saying that she was so incredibly happy after the previous session that she just sang all the way home and was feeling very upbeat. It had really changed her outlook and she was very excited to have joined the choir.'

Lastly, Ms Currant describes a woman whose marriage had ended and who had many major health issues. She had lost all sense of herself and her identity. As part of her medical support, she received hydrotherapy on the same day as the choir. 'She realised that she was getting more benefit out of being at choir so she came to choir instead. Again, she is someone that is now a figurehead in the choir and has also joined a lot of other music groups in the community.'

affecting more and more of us, and are going to be a major source of pressure on the healthcare system. This highlights a real need, even a civil responsibility for the voluntary arts and the health sector to make links. And as public sector cuts are leading to a "doing more with less" approach, it's an opportunity, too, for health professionals to think more creatively themselves about solutions to individual clients' needs.'

Appropriate activities

The Voluntary Arts website helps health professionals find such groups in their communities and locate the evidence (www.healthysocialcreative.org.uk). The site contains summaries of research on creative activities and specific long-term conditions in categories such as heart, lung, mind and cancer – including the research quoted in this article. It has stories about people with long-term conditions who have benefited from creative activities and

Box 3 The benefits of voluntary arts groups

- **Free or low cost** – no implications for health sector budgets.
- **Embedded in the local community** – helping people to avoid or repair social isolation and develop social connections. Social connections have been proven to increase wellbeing.
- **Diverse and varied** – the range of types of groups/artforms enable patients to exercise choice and control, and take part in something that fits with their own interests and perhaps hobbies they once enjoyed and found meaning from, fitting into the personalisation agenda.
- **Empowering** – groups are self-organised and can provide personal development opportunities through the different roles available in running the group.
- **Providing learning through support** – rather than being focused on one person 'leading' the group, or indeed on people with the most talent, most groups are democratic in function, and operate through mutual support and collaboration in developing people's skills and abilities.

there are leaflets for nurses to download and print to help make the case to colleagues and provide information to patients. There are also contact details for organisations that can direct health professionals to local groups. Although written for health professionals working with clients affected by long-term conditions, the website can also be used by other health professionals and by patients.

For community nurses, making links could involve anything from simple actions like directing patients to local groups, to more strategic work such as developing partnerships with voluntary arts groups or a voluntary arts umbrella body to ensure they can meet patients' needs at appropriate levels. In the past, this would have been difficult: not only due to a lack of awareness of voluntary arts groups and how to find them, but also because it has been difficult to find the research about arts and creative activities and specific conditions.

A new website, developed by London Arts in Health Forum – www.cultureandwellbeing.org.uk – has a searchable database of projects, research, practical advice and contacts. Although in its early stages, it will eventually provide a one-stop shop for health professionals wanting to find evidence about arts, creativity and health.

The value of arts and creativity has been recognised by the Department of Health (DH)'s arts and health working party. Its 2007 report stated that:

- Arts and health are integral to health, healthcare provision and healthcare environments.
- Arts and health initiatives are delivering real and measurable benefits across a range of government priority areas, and can help the DH and NHS to contribute to wider government initiatives.
- There is a wealth of good practice and a substantial evidence base.

A further report included research, evidence and examples of projects and initiatives that demonstrate the value of arts and health (DH and Arts Council England 2007).

Changing role

Smith (2002) said that 'If health is about adaptation, understanding and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything health has to offer... More and more of life's processes and difficulties – birth, death, sexuality, ageing, unhappiness, tiredness, loneliness, perceived imperfection in our bodies – are being medicalised. Medicine cannot solve these problems... Worst of all, people are diverted from what may be much better ways to adjust to these problems.' He goes on to say that 0.5 per cent of the health budget should be spent on the arts.

Voluntary arts groups could prove to be an invaluable resource to community nurses and their patients with long-term conditions, particularly in the difficult and sometimes isolating period following diagnosis and treatment. When regular appointments tail off and patients have to start to live with their illnesses, group creative activities could, for some, be a lifeline. Community nurses are well placed to take the lead in connecting patients with groups in their own community.

Find out more

- Evidence in Health and Social Care www.evidence.nhs.uk
- London Arts in Health Forum www.cultureandwellbeing.org.uk
- Voluntary Arts Groups www.healthysocialcreative.org.uk
- Arts Council England www.artscouncil.org.uk
- The Inclusion Institute www.socialinclusion.org.uk

Online archive

For related information, visit our online archive of more than 6,000 articles and search using the keywords.

This article has been subject to double-blind review and checked using antiplagiarism software

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