

Art & Health

Arts can be used in health in a number of different ways. In this document we look at what these are, focusing particularly on using art within public health. The first section offers some thoughts to health practitioners about using the arts. The second provides information to art workers about how the health sector works.

What health workers need to know about the arts

Arts can be used in health in a number of different ways. These are explored in more detail below.

Art as a health intervention with individuals

Art can be used as a

- Psychotherapeutic tool to explore issues, to work with feelings and to build up a sense of confidence and achievement e.g. music therapy
- Form of exercise e.g. dance classes
- Social activity to combat personal isolation e.g. art classes on prescription
- Distraction from physical or mental pain
- Form of relaxation

Art as a health intervention in communities or organisations

Art can be used

- To help build socially cohesive communities e.g. The Happy Hearts Lanterns event in Wrekenton, Tyne and Wear. ¹
- To create people friendly public spaces
- As a diversionary activity e.g. arts projects that take young people off the streets and away from crime or anti-social behaviour
- In health education group work to explore issues, express feelings or build confidence e.g. drama work around drugs or sex in youth clubs
- To educate people on health and social issues either by giving out information or provoking debate e.g. theatre in health education work in schools
- As a tool of persuasion e.g. advertising (if you consider it a form of applied art)

Art as a health intervention at a Societal Level

Art can be used

- As a regeneration tool e.g. Gateshead's 'Angel of the North' and waterfront art gallery and music centre. ² This could help
 - Attract investment by improving others' view of the area, thereby indirectly improving health
 - Create jobs in arts and service industries, thereby indirectly improving health
- To send a legal message e.g. in the Sixties changes in the censorship laws, deliberately or not, gave out a message that attitudes to sexuality were changing

Art as a management tool within health agencies

Art could be used

- To help develop partnerships with local people etc. e.g. making use of drama based techniques that have been developed to explore conflict (For examples see the work of Augusto Boal 3, 4)
- As a group building tool e.g. creating an orchestra from scratch 5
- To develop presentation skills e.g. classes on stand-up comedy as a way of improving people's ability to do presentations 6, 7, 8
- As a training tool e.g. Cranfield University School of Management teamed up with the Globe Theatre to use Shakespeare plays to improve management performance 9

What art workers need to know about the health sector

Art workers need to be familiar with the NHS' strategies and targets in specific lifestyle issues such as sexual health, cancer etc if they want to be commissioned. 'Choosing Health' is a good place to start. 10 Commissioning is done by Primary Care Trusts and also by GPs. Of course other parts of the NHS may also take people on.

Evidence Based Practice

Within both medicine and public health there is an increased pressure for decisions to be made on the basis of evidence. This could be about whether to prescribe a particular drug or to back a particular treatment, such as arts on referral. It equally applies to public health initiatives. Public health is not concerned with individual patients. It wants to improve the health of the whole population or parts of it. Evidence about the effectiveness of the arts in public health is often difficult to come by. In my experience, decision-making is also not just a 'scientific' process. Individuals' own beliefs and prejudices in reality often come into play. However it would be wrong to ignore the existence of evidence based practice as a factor in the NHS.

A common criticism of arts in health is the lack of both an evidence base and evaluation skills. This holds the approach back and needs to be addressed in the long-term. In the short-term artists that want to work with the NHS need to help commissioners decide whether to adopt a particular approach or not. If research evidence is hard to come by, artists could also try relating their approach to current public health theory. The following questions may be good ones to consider if the intervention is a novel one or no evaluations exist of previous projects:

- Has the intended target audience shown any interest in the kind of art approach suggested?
- What are the aims of the intervention? What health improvement is it aiming for? For example, a target from 'Choosing Health'
- What health change model does the intervention fit in and what is the evidence that this model is a useful one? For example with the Lantern Procession intervention in Wrekenton the model is one of social cohesion as a key determinant of health. What general evidence is there for this model?
- Why should this kind of intervention achieve the model's intentions? Sticking with the Wrekenton example, why should working towards a lantern procession be good for social cohesion? Does any supporting evidence exist?

- How would the project be evaluated? How will the evaluation measure improvements in health as opposed to people just liking the intervention? Put another way how will you show that the project has met its aims? (For more on evaluation see the section on the main www.sexanddrugsandrockandhealth.com website this document is a PDF on.)

Other issues

The main www.sexanddrugsandrockandhealth.com website explores a range of issues about artists and the health service working together. These include

- The need to make use of social marketing techniques including pre-testing project ideas
- The importance of artists and health workers working together in genuine partnership

The Arts Council published 'A Prospectus For Arts And Health' that you may also find useful reading. *11*

References

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