

Arts and health

Michael Eakin

Ask any two people what they understand by the term ‘Arts in health’ and you are likely to be given very different answers. Most commonly, people may talk about cheering up hospital corridors with reproduction Monets, bringing performers from the local pantomime into the children’s ward at Christmas, or giving concerts for elderly people in day centres.

Well, yes. All of these are good and worthwhile activities that can help to enliven and raise the spirits of those involved. But the arts have a much broader and more substantial role to play in our health than this; a role that is being increasingly recognized within and beyond the health sector.

The first thing to say is that arts in health is about more than arts in healthcare. The latter is a very significant subset of the former, but not its totality. In fact, I would argue that *all* art – or certainly all good art – has a health benefit. If art is about anything, it is about discovery, understanding and exploration. For the individual and the community, the experience of art as artist, participant or audience engenders a sense of who we are and of our place in the world. It stimulates and celebrates our own potential and creativity. In other words, it has the ability – as nothing else does, I think – to develop well-being, and mental and spiritual health.

To an extent we perhaps take the arts and their positive influence for granted. Sometimes things can be more evident in their absence than in their presence. Imagine a community completely devoid of any creative arts whatsoever and ask if it is likely to be a healthy community. It is a question worth asking in all sorts of contexts. Take those vital communities, schools, for example. I have the dubious pleasure at the moment of trailing around our local secondary schools trying to choose the right one for our 11-year-old twin daughters. Actually, for all that it is an exhausting process, it often *is* a pleasure, above all in art classes, drama studios and music rooms, where the positive impact on, and enjoyment of, children participating in arts activities is manifest. Here every teacher will tell you his or her favourite anecdote of the child who has been given new purpose and confidence – new well-being – through the discovery of their talent with a paint brush or an electric guitar.

So at North West Arts Board we are keen to promote and develop an understanding of the importance of the arts across a very wide health agenda. And, in doing so, we recognize the very wide range of organizations that are using the arts very effectively in their work to ensure healthy communities. Such organi-

zations include local authorities, arts organizations and, of course, the healthcare sector itself.

The range of activity can be hinted at by mentioning just three examples of current and recent projects in the North West.

In Halton, the local authority is leading an Arts for Health initiative, which aims to encourage and support people in improving their health through the use of the arts. It is one part of Halton’s Healthy Living Project, aimed at the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of Halton’s population and funded by the Single Regeneration Budget and the New Opportunities Fund.

The project is using artists to help address its five priority health issues. A textile artist and a writer have been used to work with local people in creating pieces exploring respiratory health issues and smoking. Thirty-nine people attended a photography and creative writing project that looked at living with cancer, the results of which will be exhibited in the new cancer support centre. A theatre company, Round Midnight, and dance company, Ludus, are working with young people in exploring issues such as masculinity and male sexuality, and teenage pregnancy, respectively. A whole series of creative writing, ceramics, dance and other arts practices are being used to develop projects that promote positive well-being. And over 240 local people attending a doctor’s surgery (not all at the same time – the waiting lists aren’t that bad!) gave their perceptions of waiting at the surgery, which fed into the creation of a large artwork by artist Lynne Stein exploring healthier lifestyles. In every case, artists are unlocking, interpreting and playing back local people’s feelings about themselves and their health in ways that nobody else could, and are creating lasting pieces of work out of the process.

In contrast, many hospitals are really developing interesting approaches to using artists in enhancing their physical environment. The Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Trust, for example, has been spurred on by a visit to the hospital from the NHS Patient Environment Action Team to develop an arts strategy. A staff project team from the hospital has worked to bring in artists to help with the design for a new Day Surgery Centre, and later to select and commission an artist for an etched glass piece within the development. Further projects are now being developed including a piece of interactive sculpture in the courtyard

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of a new building. Ideas are moving beyond the physical environment to include proposals for a 2 week music festival, and for collaborations with local schools involving their exhibiting of work in the hospital.

Finally, PRESCAP, a community arts organization in Preston is just one of many companies devising high-quality participative arts projects in their area that have a real health dividend. One recent example of its work is the Schools Self-Esteem project. Artist Ben Hunt worked with small groups of pupils identified as low achievers in three Preston schools, on self-esteem and confidence issues – pertinent given the high suicide rate amongst young people, especially teenage males. He used collage, cartoon drawing, silk painting and photography to explore issues surrounding positive and negative self-esteem.

The end product was a box of 30 trading cards featuring heroes and demons of self-esteem, created with the full involvement of the group, and distributed to pupils in the schools. It was a project that enabled these young people to deal with these difficult issues in a way that was unthreatening to them, gave them a voice, and used their own creative talent. Oh, and it was fun too.

I choose these three examples, because they have quality and integrity, and they illustrate what can be achieved where there are will, ideas and energy.

We are working now with the NHS in the North West to build on this work, and I hope, to ensure that the arts really do play their full part in ensuring the health of the people of this region.