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Editorial: art puts the whole in holism

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Editorial

David Peters

Editor-in-chief



Art puts the whole in holism

This issue explores the healing power of the arts. The arts! With the English NHS in upheaval isn't the journal fiddling while Rome burns? We don't think so. Public sector healthcare needs re-thinking, and the fact that GPs' salaries are on the rise, while some hospital trusts are going to the wall despite massive expenditure on management, are signs of the times. Good primary care is cost-effective; pitching more cash into hospitals and high tech won't create health (but nor will tick-box primary care). It is holism the NHS needs: a rebirth of the art of medicine, an NHS based on smaller more coherent units, organised more like communities and less like production lines; where doctors are less influenced by pharma corporations, and act as change agents; an NHS that supports resilient aware staff, greater public involvement and access to a wider range of low-tech treatment and prevention approaches.

The ways we have been thinking about and doing healthcare aren't working; a holistic transformation is needed. In his article, Michael Dixon predicts how creative use of the new commissioning system and a primary care-led NHS will drive a resurgence in the art of healthcare. We pray he is right. It will call for vision, group creativity and humanity. That is why the arts are so crucial right now, and why this issue looks at the potential role of the arts in several different ways. Because as holists our concern is not just with art as a 'treatment'; art also has the power to evoke empathy, cohesiveness and solidarity; to inspire creativity and innovation.

Holism means recognising our interdependence, and re-owning the task of healing and being healed, individually and communally – something the playwright Nell Dunn tells about in her interview with William House. These are tasks the arts can help us reframe, see in a new light and address in unforeseen ways. As the artist Mateo Willis describes in this issue, 'the creation of art is a holistic practice, a process that

necessitates a perspective of the "whole". Yes, says the left brain, but can you provide me with evidence that it's good for patients? Harry Caton, the patients' czar, maintains that it is, and he wants those who work with the arts in healthcare to collaborate with researchers and prove their worth. Angela Clow's small study of how visiting an art gallery changes immune function could be a piece of the jigsaw.

Art can do more than this: as John Salinski reminds us, it can be yeast in the lifeless dough of left brain-dominated education, practice and self-care. He reports on using literature and film with GP Registrars. In the same vein, Phil Hammond – doctor, writer and comedian – looks at doctoring as a performing art; Tim O'Leary, in the CD enclosed with this issue, shares the photographs and poems he made to help him digest the experience of a serious illness; Larry Butler brings us examples of poetry from his workshops at Maggie's Cancer Centres in Scotland; Hazel Adams describes using painting as therapy in the NHS; Alan Kellas, an NHS psychiatrist, reflects on how movement therapy has helped him work more effectively with people who have learning disabilities.

This issue of the *JHH* illustrates how the arts can humanise 'the system', make us better practitioners and more effective self-healers. So let's celebrate the ways art makes us human, and the fact that humans make art because it wakes us up; that it energises us because the act of creation is life-affirming, joyful, cathartic: for the NHS is in dire need of these gifts. Art can help make sense of experience or express what we can't find words for: how crucial it is for medicine to harness its powers. Art's messages about a larger reality inspire awe and connect us with eternal values: the renewal of 21st century healthcare will depend on them.

This issue is dedicated to the many practitioners who value their art and who work artfully. It was a pleasure to work with Dr William House, GP, playwright (and BHMA Trustee) who co-created this arts-themed issue.