

The Millennium Arts Project – What it has Meant for our Patients

Presented by Christina Rowland-Jones,
Chair of the Friends of Fulbourn Hospital & the Community,
at the Arts and Minds Autumn Event on 18th October 2007

The Friends of Fulbourn Hospital & the Community set up their Millennium Arts Project (MAP) nearly 8 years ago. As a small charity we have no paid staff, and all the organisation is done by volunteers. MAP places artists-in-residence in wards and related community settings. They run a range of arts workshops which provide meaningful and intellectually stimulating activities for patients of all ages, in a relaxed, informal and sociable environment. Each artist is supported by 1 or 2 volunteer helpers, who may be mental health service users, or students gaining valuable experience. Workshops have included pottery, textiles, dance, music, storytelling, landscape design and gardening. We collaborate closely with staff and have covered most mental illnesses, and a wide age-range, all with great success. Demand always exceeds what we can afford.

A pottery workshop at the Deighton Intermediate Care Service was one of our earliest projects, 7 years ago, and it is still running. I asked staff nurse, Hazel Smith, to write a report especially for this evening, on what our MAP work has meant for her patients. The following was written following discussions with her colleagues, the artists and participants, and I am reading it on Hazel's behalf as she is on leave.

She writes:-

The Deighton provides day-care 5 days a week for elderly people with psychiatric illnesses. 3 of these days cater specifically for people with organic illness (that is, dementia) and on 2 of the 3 days we have pottery and dance workshops run by MAP.

Potter Bob Race has been with us for 7 years. Original MAP funding was for one weekly workshop, but it was so successful that our unit budget was adjusted to fund a second weekly group. Dancer Mick Hilbury has been running a tea dance for over 2 years. Originally monthly, that too proved so popular that the unit itself funds a second one, making them fortnightly.

For the tea dance cucumber sandwiches are made, furniture pushed back and chairs arranged for onlookers. As M.C., Mick provides the music and leads us in the waltz,

quickstep, foxtrot, hokey-cokey - even line dancing. One staff member wears 50's dresses and silver dancing shoes. Several nimble gentlemen patients dance regularly. Ladies, unsteady on their feet and nervous about walking, demonstrate unexpected confidence and sense of rhythm. Nobody will ever forget the lady who left her wheelchair to dance for a few, remarkable moments with Mick, a look of enchantment on her face. Or the time an elderly gentleman invited an even older lady onto the floor.

During the dementing process a patient's insight can be painful, because the sufferer is aware that they are losing their faculties. This can lead to depression and lethargy, or anger and frustration. Patients who suffer from either of these reactions respond positively to the dancing. The lethargic patient, rooted to the spot, giggles loudly as a nurse jives around him. The angry, frustrated patient spends much time irritably pacing the unit, unable to understand why he is there. When nothing else reaches him the tea dance always does, and the more his personality disintegrates the more he gives himself to the music, singing and dancing with increasing abandon.

Not everybody dances, preferring to watch. One lady taps her feet in time to the music, and talks of her love of dancing and the joy it brought her in her younger days. For most clients in this age-group the local dance was a familiar event, a significant social occasion where young people could meet – the highlight of the week. At the Deighton we hope that the atmosphere and ambiance of our tea dance invokes the memory of those days and that, for a while, the disintegration of the personality caused by dementia can be suspended and replaced by feelings of times gone by, when life had potential and the personality was intact.

The enduring popularity of the pottery workshop is truly remarkable. Over 7 years there has been no reduction in enthusiasm, and no-one ever wants to stop attending. That they enjoy themselves is clear from the gales of laughter that erupt from the room. More subtle benefits appear during interactions within the group. Members assess each other's efforts, commenting, praising, providing emotional support and encouragement in the non-judgemental atmosphere provided by Bob's ever-patient approach. The work produced can be shown to others, handled, admired, taken home, presented to family members and displayed. The creator feels valued and appreciated.

Bob prides himself on finding solutions to the practical problems presented by some patients. If a participant can only roll clay into balls he will help to press them into a mould producing a pot made of balls. For a blind patient he makes something in advance, which she can explore with her fingers and copy. His enabling approach also allows patients to express a sense of humour – one man made a holidaying tortoise, complete with snorkel, flippers and a boat on its back. Bob's observations of how people are functioning also provides valuable information for the staff team, both when assessing a new patient and when monitoring an ongoing situation.

One of the most potent consequences of a workshop run in this non-judgemental way is the beneficial effect on patients' self-esteem. This is an elusive, fragile quality, easily damaged by life events. It can be difficult to encourage the delicate growth of self-esteem in the hearts and minds of those whose self-confidence and self-respect are being steadily eroded by the psychological disintegration of dementia. But it can be nurtured by acknowledgement of an individual's personal worth, which is in turn reflected back in the eyes of their peers, carers and loved ones. The pottery workshop, with its good-humoured, uncritical atmosphere, provides an environment in which self-esteem can flourish. Such a resource is of incalculable value.

The staff are unanimous in the view that neither workshop could offer what it does without the unique qualities of the artists who run them. Mick is multi-talented, a dancer and entertainer all his life. He doesn't see the patients as disabled. Rather he sees the person within, that part which is the same in all of us, which never grows old. His comment on the lady who rose from her wheelchair to dance sums it up: 'You look into her eyes and see she's back in her young days - unless you feel that yourself you can't make others believe it'. Bob prefers to work in mental health, rather than education. He finds the participants less inhibited, more creative, taking ideas he gives them and adding their own individual slant to make something unique. For staff, the quietly supportive environment he creates has an extraordinarily powerful, enabling effect on the participants. This is a precious resource.

I will leave the last word to our young-onset dementia patients, who kindly gave me their comments:

- I don't usually get the opportunity to do this kind of thing
- My children can't believe I can be artistic

- I never thought I could do it – but I can
- It's nice to meet and communicate with people with the same problem
- It's good to relax for a couple of hours and forget everything else
- No competition – just fun!