

ARTS AND HEALTHCARE EVENT

“OPEN TO ALL:” MENTAL HEALTH, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

THE WALLACE COLLECTION

TUESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2008

I'm delighted to be here to help launch the Open to All training package today. This will provide an excellent resource for gallery staff to expand the work they already do in the community, in particular to tackle exclusion and improve access for those suffering from mental health problems. I'd like to thank the Wallace Collection, the Tate, the National Social Inclusion Programme and the V&A for working with us on this project.

The remarkable and encouraging thing for me is the commitment that so many museums, libraries and art galleries are demonstrating to reach beyond their traditional constituents. We have some of the finest art collections and museums in the world. This government has been deeply committed to making sure that this vital element of our

culture and heritage is as accessible to as many people as possible.

This is not just a point of national pride. Museums and galleries have a key role to play in addressing social exclusion. Music, poetry, dance, drama and the visual arts have always been important to our mental and physical wellbeing, and collective participation and engagement in the arts is a fundamental element of any civilised society. As E.M. Forster put it: "Art is the one orderly product that our middling race has produced...it is the best evidence we can have of our dignity."

IMPORTANCE OF PATIENT ENVIRONMENT

The arts certainly have a key role to play in healthcare - its therapeutic value cannot be underestimated. But this isn't a matter of hanging a few expensive paintings in a badly-lit hospital corridor, or replacing surgery with sculpture classes.

It's well-documented that those hospitals and other care settings that pay close attention to the overall physical environment for patients (preferably by listening to what patients and staff say would make things better) achieve real improvements in the health of patients. Just as it's recognised that in schools, cramped corridors and dingy classrooms that are freezing in winter and roasting in summer are hardly conducive to good behaviour and motivation, so we also need to recognise that the hospital environment can impact upon patient health.

A study by the University of Nottingham showed that patients on the new cardiac ward at Leeds General Infirmary were on average discharged three days earlier, needed significantly less medication and rated their care as better than those who were treated on the old ward. Patients on the trauma and orthopaedic wards of the Chelsea and Westminster hospital who were exposed to music and the visual arts were able to go home one day earlier and needed less pain relief than other patients.

ARTS AS SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE USERS

And in the community, research shows that active involvement in the arts – whether by volunteering, taking a painting class or joining a music group – can have a profoundly positive effect on patients' wellbeing, particularly patients suffering from mental illness, or at risk of developing mental health problems.

A recent study commissioned by my department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (“Mental Health, social inclusion and arts: developing the evidence base”) has shown that participation in the arts leads to significant improvements in health, and that it can also boost self esteem, and reduce feelings of isolation and exclusion. And the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence is currently looking at the benefits of offering arts therapy to patients with schizophrenia.

None of this should come as a surprise – the therapeutic value of the arts has long been acknowledged. The Greek theatre of Epidaurus [**epi-door-uss**], built in 400 BC, was a place for pilgrims to honour the God of medicine: A commentator at the time said: “They came to cleanse their souls with therapeutic waters and with theatre.”

Many of us turn to music, poetry or art during difficult times in our lives – some of the best-selling poetry anthologies are those which deal with topics such as bereavement or other kinds of distress. It's widely recognised that some of the best art comes from the struggle to express thoughts or feelings that are difficult or complex. The great American artist Georgia O' Keefe, put it very well: “I found I could say things with colours and shapes which I couldn't say in any other way – things I had no words for.”

Even those of us who make no claim to such talents, can still benefit mentally and physically from having the opportunity to be creative. And for those facing acute difficulties, such

services can be a lifeline – like Sandwell Third Age Arts, which provides group and individual arts-based activities for older people suffering from a range of mental health problems or dementia. Third Age Arts delivers its services in partnership with psychologists, social workers, nurses, care managers and other charities such as Age Concern. Those involved tell us that it lifts them out of their depression – keeping their minds busy and helping them to come to terms with their condition.

I would like to see the benefits of participation in the arts recognised more widely by health and social care professionals, particularly those involved in commissioning services for people with mental health problems. This is not some kind of eccentric add-on – it should be part of the mainstream in both health and social care. And through the Arts/Health group that's been set up in my department, we will be looking at what more we can do to provide guidance, where to go for advice on best practice and sources of funding for clinicians and arts professionals.

It's not that we think the arts are some kind of catch-all medical panacea – that listening to the Beatles is some kind of cure for illness – but projects up and down the country that involve partnerships between arts and health professionals are demonstrating real benefits – improving patient self esteem, helping people make connections and engendering a sense of community.

CONCLUSION

Access and participation in the arts are an essential part of our everyday wellbeing and quality of life. Arts therapy has an important role to play in providing better, more personalised care for patients. I expect this role to become even more important as, following the publication of the Next Stage Review, we look at how we transform the NHS, from a service that's excellent at recognising illness and treating it, to one that can more successfully prevent illness and promote health and wellbeing.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my
commitment to this important project.