

Arts and Health International Conference Report

The following report on the 2nd Annual International Arts and Health Conference "The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing" held at the Sydney Myer Asia Centre, University of Melbourne, 16-19 November 2010, was written for moving on by **Heather Hill**. Heather also presented a paper at this conference with William Feez, Not Like Pills – The Arts and Relationship in Dementia Care. This paper is published in this issue on p. 32, following Michelle Mahrer's presentation, Dance Therapy with Dementia Residents, made at the same conference (see p.28).



Last week, I was fortunate to be able to attend and present at the 2nd Annual International Arts and Health conference, which had its inaugural meeting in Port Macquarie, NSW, in 2009. The conference brought together professionals from the arts, arts therapies, psychotherapy, health, education, human services and from various combinations thereof. It was a rich feast, with plenary sessions in the morning and afternoon, and breakout sessions (up to 12 in one time slot) on all sorts of topics.

With such a feast, all I can hope to do in this short report is share with you some of the highlights (for me) and some key ideas. I imagine that sometime next year, the conference organisers will have the complete program on their website.

Anyone who knows me will not be surprised to hear that most of the sessions I attended were on working with people with dementia, including a presentation from our very own dance-movement therapist Michelle Mahrer, who showed some

lovely DVD footage of her work at the Montefiore Home in NSW.

I found many of these presentations quite inspiring. What really struck me about the arts programs for people with dementia was their innovation and their courage to challenge people way beyond what might be considered possible. I particularly loved the presentation on a program of stand up comedy and improvisation for people with dementia. Another highlight was a presentation about the creation of artworks for display as street banners by a group of older people who had a life connection with The Parade in Norwood, S.A. They used some interesting art materials to create the images, which were later digitally layered to produce the final artwork. One of the presentation slides shows the participants creating the pattern for one banner out of liquorice straws, liquorice allsorts and other old-style sweets! Most of these, I believe, did end up in the artwork!

One of the most inspiring presentations was by Mike White and Mary Robson of Durham University, Medical Humanities Centre (www.dur.ac.uk/cmh/cahbm2/). To me they represented an ideal of combining both the academic/research with the grass roots work in communities. Some of the key points they made were:

- The arts are all about relationship-based work.
- Resilience is not just a quality of the individual but also of the individual's environment. Arts practice is good at addressing both of these.
- Mike and Mary preferred to use "flourishing" instead of "wellbeing" because "flourishing" suggests a more active role, as well as interaction with others.
- The arts work with emotion. They referred to Mark Johnson's book ("The Meaning of the Body") which noted the importance of emotion in learning.

I was pleased to hear Mike and Mary talk about the arts as “relationship-based work. Implicit in many presentations, and made explicit in my paper (co-authored with William Feez, a creative arts therapist from Brisbane), was the notion that the arts need to be engaged with in the context of relationship. They are “not like pills” to be “delivered” in order to achieve particular effects. It’s about people engaging with other people.

It’s also about offering a space for this to happen. Over and over again, the message came out loud and clear that the arts offered people a space – a space to be themselves, a space to be someone else, a space to do things they’d never done before or never dared to do, a space for reflection, for self-expression and for reaching out to others.

The other key message for me in all the presentations was the value placed on the activity itself – art-making. Of course none of these – relationship, space, participation in meaningful activity - can be separated out from each other. The transformation that is so often seen in arts programs is more likely to come about when all of these elements come together. I make no apology for coming out of some of these sessions feeling “warm and fuzzy” – for here were many wonderful HUMAN stories told by people passionate and excited about their work.

An important issue which came up on many occasions was the issue of program evaluation and research to establish “evidence”. David Crosbie, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia and an inspiring speaker, noted that it was not enough to do good work, but that we needed to better document, share and advocate. While I did hear one researcher confidently state that quantitative data were the “best”, my impression was that many others opted to include quantitative data more for political reasons than from a conviction that quantitative data were “the best”. Having the work acknowledged as valid, and indeed being granted the research funding in the first place, were dependent on conforming to methodologies based on a medical/natural sciences model. All agreed that this was an area that needed attention and work – identifying the right questions, developing studies relevant to the field but which still constituted “evidence” in the larger domains of health, education and so forth.

Denise Grocke, Professor of Music Therapy at the University of Melbourne, gave an excellent presentation on a mixed methods research study of the effects of music therapy on the lives of people with “severe and enduring mental illness”.

Using mixed methods seemed to be a way to navigate between the desire and need to ask the important questions for the profession and the requirements by others to provide particular kinds of “evidence”. I was also pleased to see that Denise is passionate about participatory research, which is a methodology which aims to include the people being studied in every stage of the research. This is an aspect which I believe is also important in research with people with dementia. Congratulations to Denise for her very well-deserved award at the conference, honouring her long time work in promoting music therapy.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of any conference is the opportunity for networking, sharing with others with similar focus, and also meeting others working in quite different contexts, within different art forms and so on. And of course there were those little touches that only an arts conference can include – music and dance in the corridors, vocalising/singing (thanks to Community Arts Victoria) prior to the plenary sessions, juggling displays in the courtyard, and a group of primary school children playing drums. We also all received the most beautiful conference bags, sewn by the Indigenous Women’s Sewing Group.

This was a conference which gave the widest perspectives on the arts and health, and allowed us, as one speaker put it, to “connect with our tribe”. The Arts and Health Conference 2011 will again be held in Melbourne – in the 3rd week of November. I’ve marked the date in my diary already!

Heather Hill

Dr Heather Hill, Prof. Member DTAA, has contributed articles to numerous journals, and written a number of book chapters. For more about Heather, see p. 32. And for a review of the second edition of her book, *Invitation to the Dance: Dance for people with dementia and their carers*, see *Moving On*, Vol 8 no’s 3 and 4, p.66.

Photograph of Heather: Sue Scott, 1988

Ed. Note:

The 3rd Annual Art of Good Health and Wellbeing International Arts and Health Conference will take place at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 14 to 18 November 2011. See: www.artsandhealth.org