

APPG 3 minute talk 9th November 2015 Fiona Hamilton

I developed creative writing-for-wellbeing sessions for patients, carers and staff in Bristol's NHS and complementary cancer services fourteen years ago and these are ongoing. I am Arts Lead for the new Portland Centre for Integrative Medicine in Bristol. Some participants face a terminal diagnosis and some face end of life.

The desire to be creative and to feel life is meaningful can be vibrant until end of life in spite of physical constraints and mental challenges. Psychological distress is often the thing people find most challenging. The arts can contribute to alleviating distress and providing social support at the same time

In a recent audit of the hospital sessions participants valued the following:

- Sense of greater control
- Concentrated and witnessed opportunities to articulate deeper and more nuanced feelings & thoughts than is usually possible in everyday life
- Cathartic, relaxing, enjoyable sessions
- They found the approach helpful for dealing with transitions
- They gained confidence in talking to others about illness or dying, and this reduced a sense of isolation and in some cases helped affirm or heal relationships
- Legacy writing can be a gift to others
- Writing sessions helped people come to terms with bereavement
- Carers gained an expressive outlet and techniques for self support

Teenagers and young adults gave similar feedback, including 'pride in producing something especially when experiencing multiple losses'. The model of palliative care in cancer services could be adapted for other groups, including people with mental health conditions, where life expectancy may be reduced, but 'palliative' may not be an appropriate term.

Arts can become 'glue' in a person's support system, enabling them to see professionals, family, friends and other strands of life interweaving and increasing the sense of a robust network of varied elements. There are more people nowadays living for significant periods with a terminal diagnosis. With a shortage of GPs and community nursing staff amongst other pressures, carers and healthcare professionals need additional strategies.

The arts provide a powerful forum to air issues of death and dying which are encumbered with taboo and awkwardness in this culture. Medical students on Medical Humanities programmes and within medical training (such as the Whole Person Care strand at Bristol University), and healthcare professionals generally, can engage emotionally and personally as well as intellectually with issues of mortality before they are faced with them in practice.

Arts practitioners are good at thinking laterally and joining things up – why not employ their skills in multiple ways and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes? – they can design interventions for different needs, sell artwork for fundraising, and facilitate sessions.

Therapeutic writing training is provided at Metanoia Institute, London and Orchard Foundation. Students learn how to work safely to high standards with people facing different challenges. The Portland Centre is to provide a Masters in Integrative Medicine.

We need to collect different sorts of evidence in more readily available and organized ways and think about longer-term economic outcomes. The culture of institutions influences access. We need better access to palliative care and integrative support.