

Why dance in hospital?

We have a need to be well.

We have a need to connect with others, with ourselves, with our environment.

We have a need to make sense of our lives, have a narrative we can share with others.

Even in hospital.

A terrible sadness for the elderly who find themselves hospitalised is the terror that they have reached the end of the road, that they have become unresolvable problems, that they have no control over their lives anymore. This sadness adversely affects ability to function and to heal. It's hard to get better when you're depressed, incomprehensibly and unreasonably ill, and alone.

Good hospital practice is increasingly about delivering health programs that encourage patients to find alternative and additional ways to healing & health - a powerful collaboration between the healthcare professionals, and individual initiative.

It is well established that the arts go some way in creating the right healing environments and providing the right processes to help people heal. Dance is an arts form that deals directly with the body, and as such is extremely well placed in hospital to provide healing and wellbeing.

In bringing together the world of dance and the world of the hospital, the common factors are humans, bodies, health, and well-being.

One of the best things about dance, is that everyone can do it. Perhaps not to an ideal or standard they feel to be good enough or right, or beautiful, but most certainly, we all have opportunity to access body and movement as long as we have breath and a pulse.

Dance includes a wide range of somatic practices and dance forms. Dance is also one of the simplest art forms, as really it only requires a body. Dance can happen anywhere, at any stage and age of life.

In September 2014, I spent 4 weeks in the United States, chasing the sun from New York across to California, San Francisco. My purpose?: To visit three hospitals, researching how their Wellness and Arts programmes served patients, staff, caregivers and the wider hospital community. Complimenting the hospital work, I met dance practitioners who work in the community with elderly populations.

I met individual dance practitioners to experience ways in which dance is used to engage with and benefit older people. I met and danced with people living with Dementia, Parkinson's and MS, as well as people living with cancer and drug addiction. I met and danced with healthy older people who dance to maintain health and well-being as well as a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. I was thinking about how techniques and principles dancers work with are transferrable to all people, with and without illness.

DanceMoves is a small Cambridge based company dedicated to promoting wellbeing and health in the community and in hospital through movement and dance programmes. In September 2013, DanceMoves devised and delivered a pilot dance project at Cambridge University Hospital with the Head of Arts and the Falls Coordinator nurse. For 10 weeks, we ran *integrated and inclusive* dance sessions, involving patients from the Department of Medicine for the Elderly wards, and the Neuro-Rehabilitation ward. We welcomed family members, as well as all staff.

The pilot project has grown into ongoing weekly sessions across four wards and has now been funded for another year. The sessions allow patients and staff alike the opportunity to experience and learn the creative, playful and healing processes involved in movement and dance.

Using imagery, metaphor, and of course, music, patients and staff alike become more flexible, more open, more fluid, - nourished, energised, connected and focused.

Moods shifts, bodies release pain, tension, paranoia and anxiety. Not many people can resist the cajoling voice of Nat King Cole, or the doleful wail of Elvis. The restorative order of Bach. The still important heart-feltness of the war songs.

Pain relief, stress reduction, relaxation, better hospital coping skills, enhanced hospital experiences, healthier life choices - these are important skills every patient needs. Importantly, these are the same tools that can help hospital staff cope with the demands of pressurised work loads.

For us so called "well" people, if our back is feeling stiff or we're feeling out of sorts, we move - we stretch, go for a walk, alone or maybe with the dog or a favourite friend. We might even dance about in our kitchen. We naturally move into a different frame of being.

In hospital, we have to recreate that sense of independence and freedom in a wheelchair, in the bay of a busy ward, in the staff room, or by a bedside.

By focusing on the positive potential of how we *can* move, how we *want* to move, side stepping assessment of what's *wrong*, we open ourselves to the wisdom of the body-mind connection and our body's innate ability to heal.

Step by step we find our way to moving more fully, generously, with vigour and vitality.

Through music and simple movement - following breath, tracing melody with fingers, improvising and creating, we move, and we realise our capacity to experience more, feel more, express more.

Working with older patients, I witness tired, weakened and frail bodies come back to life again. I witness the energy come back into eyes, smiles light up faces, voices open in song, and in conversation.

A key focus of the sessions is to facilitate opportunities for staff to foster new and different relationships with their patients. The project offers staff the chance to bring their patients into a non-clinical space, to enjoy a non-medicalised approach to healing and well-being.

We remember who we are, and we reconnect through the pleasure of sharing our stories. Creating dances with the people we look after brings a richness and resilience into the caring relationship.

Motivation, engagement, resilience, and understanding of holistic health - these are empowering and imperative abilities for people to have in order to get better. Especially the elderly, who commonly suffer from depression, disorientation, and apathy when entering hospital - particularly when staying for a length of time. It is important to find a means whereby they can build positive relationships with their health carers and regain a sense of their value.

*We dance because Dance is fun, Dance is joyous, life is a dance, and dance is life.*

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