

Emerging Images: an Arts for Health Workshop and Exhibition for MS

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Introduction

In early 2013 the John Hunter Hospital Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Clinic coordinated an alternative type of support group, an art workshop. The catalyst for the workshop was the annual Arts for Health MS Exhibition. The workshop and exhibition brought together a group of artists who share a diagnosis of MS.



Arts and Health

Health care facilities have long used visual and performing arts to improve their environment. There are demonstrated health benefits to art exhibitions in hospitals. Reduced blood pressure, anxiety and depression are linked to people engaging with art exhibitions¹.

Reflections on the experience of people with chronic illness creating visual art has been shown to contribute to well-being, promoting a positive identity and improving social networks^{1,2,4,5,6}.

In MS creating visual art can provide an opportunity to express the physical limitations and challenging emotions that the disease often brings³.

Discussion and Future Considerations

Engaging with art, either by being exposed to it or creating it, has shown to improve health measures and quality of life for people with chronic illness, including Multiple Sclerosis^{1,4}.

The artists who participated in the MS Arts for Health workshop and exhibition all had strong backgrounds in visual art and were able to produce very meaningful personal and collaborative works.

It is not clear if the same thematic impressions would be evident in the wider MS community. However the benefits of engaging with art as an observer are likely to improve the quality of life of people with chronic illness¹.

The outcome drawn from qualitative review of the MS art workshop and exhibition supports facilitating future creative projects.



Background

The 6 weekly workshop sessions were facilitated by artist Rhonda Partridge, who encouraged the group to draw on their experience of having MS, their life challenges and environmental issues to create a number of works based around the theme of Emerging Images. The works were exhibited in the annual Arts for Health MS Awareness Exhibition in July and August 2013.

The focus of the collaborative work, called Imbolke, is an emerging face that is representative of the artists. In Gaelic folklore Imbolke (or Imbolc) represents winter solstice to spring; darkness emerging to light. Imbolke is the Goddess emerging from the darkness to light. This work is on black board and collaged largely from magazine and photographic paper with palm frond and moth.

Emerging Themes

A phenomenological review of feedback from the artists who participated in the workshop reflected themes identified in the current literature on the effect of art on people with chronic illness (including MS).

Creating art fostered feelings of relaxation and reduced stress. When asked about the role that art plays in their lives the participants shared common ideas of art as a vessel for self expression and gaining pleasure from producing something of beauty or statement. Other articulated common themes were feeling socially connected and having a sense of being validated.

When interviewed about their experience of the workshop and exhibition the artists shared concerns about being challenged to work to a deadline and being open to group and facilitator critique. Despite this the workshop presented a safe environment for creativeness and the artists felt great pleasure from the collaboration.

Commenting on the works' exposure to the hospital population, the artists thought hospital visitors would find their work a welcome distraction and would provide the impetus for considered thought about MS, the lived experience of MS and their own life challenges.



Imbolke (Darkness to Light)

References

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