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The Art of Healing

Art therapy proves to be a brush stroke of genius

By Amy Storer and Ryan L. Dansak

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Can art miraculously heal the terminally ill, mend broken bones or send cancer into remission? Probably not. So why are healthcare institutions – by the masses – providing blank canvases to patients? The answer may lie in the potential art has to provoke positive feelings in those who create and view it.

“Patch” Adams, MD, writes in the foreword of *Illness and the Art of Creative Self-Expression* (New Harbinger Publications, 2000), a book by John Graham-Pole, MD: “Invite artists to pass through the front doors of every healthcare facility to do their work of healing. ...Creativity is great medicine for all. ...It prevents disease and promotes wellness.”



Maria Regina Lupo, MFA, an art therapist at the Morristown, N.J.-based Atlantic Health Mind/Body Center, works with several occupational therapists (OTs). The OTs needed her to challenge the patients physically, offer insight into each patient's illness, engage their senses and build upon the medical team's goals. Lupo employed directives that use both hands, dominate and non-dominate, and addressed the issues of perception, memory and neglect.

Hospital administrators around the country are apparently taking this sentiment to heart. The stereotypic hospitals with stark-white walls and drab waiting rooms are being replaced by facilities that have walls covered with colorful murals. And the bright colors and positive artistry isn't just appearing on the walls; patients are participating in “art therapy” as part of their therapy care plan.

Sculpting a Healthier Patient

Art therapy in a medical setting is a complementary therapy. And art therapists are now complementing the patient care provided by many physical, occupational, speech and respiratory therapists nationwide.

Maria Regina Lupo, MFA, an art therapist at the Morristown, N.J.-based [Atlantic Health Mind/Body Center](#), works with many different types of therapists and therapy patients. She says art therapy uses art materials and often non-verbal communication to assist in a treatment plan that has been established medically to meet the individual needs of the patient.

“As an art therapist,” she explains, “my first priority is to enhance the treatment plan that has been established by the medical team.”

For example, Lupo currently works with several occupational therapists (OTs). When she first started to collaborate with the OTs, they needed her to develop sessions that challenge the patients physically, offer insight into each individual patient's illness, engage their senses and build onto the goals established by the medical team.

Lupo employed directives that use both hands, dominate and non-dominate, and addressed the issues of perception, memory and neglect. “One OT is always present at



Burning Issues

The director of Philadelphia-based Temple University's Level I Burn Unit explains how teamwork between their nurses and therapists helps to offset the patients' pain and despair with an incredible strength to meet and exceed goals.

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each session to guide and/or reinforce the goals established medically for each individual patient,” Lupo says. “I believe that this new format serves the patient very well in the coordination of his/her medical care during the early, critical stages of rehabilitation.”

In fact, she says, in her last session the goal was to assess the fine motor skills of each patient and to build strength in both hands. The OT had a new **Bioness** device, which provides electrical stimulation to the hand, and the OT wanted the patient to work on a contour drawing exercise wearing this device. “The OT worked directly with the patient wearing the device as he attempted the art directive during the group, adding another dimension to the art therapy service provided,” Lupo says.

She also collaborates with recreation therapists (RTs). The groups, Lupo explains, are given twice a month with music – sometimes live music. The groups’ goals are relaxation, peer support, pain management, to address feelings of isolation and to address personal issues.

“The RTs are very supportive of the group and encourage patients to attend. Often, the RTs participate, which creates a bond between staff and patients, also helping patients overcome their resistance to the Art process,” says Lupo. “The RTs’ encouragement and support of the Art therapy session is critical, since The RTs are the staff members the patients see daily and look to for approval [and] guidance.”

Lupo says art therapy can also assist therapists with the diagnosis of the patient. “[It can] give the team insight into the strengths and weakness of an individual patient, which can be very useful in treating the patient,” she adds.

The Mental Picture

According to Lupo, medical art therapy is a relatively new application of art therapy, as art therapists were traditionally used in the mental health field.

Lupo says she works with patients to become “whole,” both psychologically and physically, and create an environment of healing that extends to the staff, patients and families, even when a total cure is not possible.

Art therapy may also enhance a patient’s self-esteem, increase coping mechanisms, address personal issues, help the patient adjust to diagnoses, fulfill a need to be creative, offer emotional support and address feelings of isolation, as well as other psychosocial concerns. “Specifically, in rehabilitation, general art therapy goals are to assist the patient in gaining independence and aid the patient in his/her maximum level of mobility,” says Lupo.

And now, there’s evidence-based support to Lupo’s claims. A recent study published in the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* found that art therapy can reduce a broad spectrum of symptoms related to pain and anxiety, especially in cancer patients.

In the study performed at **Northwestern Memorial Hospital**, 50 patients were enrolled over a four-month period. The patients assessed their pain, tiredness, nausea, depression, anxiety, drowsiness, lack of appetite, wellbeing and shortness of breath, measured by the Ednomton Symptom Assessment Scale (ESAS).

The patients participated in a one-hour art session as part of their routine treatments. Sessions ranged from light, entertaining distraction to investigating deep psychological issues, says Nancy Nainis, MA, ATR, an art therapist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and lead author on the study.



Art therapy is touted for treating the “whole” person. As the medical field comes to understand the mind-body connection and its healing power, Lupo says, the art therapist will be viewed as a necessary component of the medical team to effect healing.

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By the end of the four months, the patients reported significant reductions in eight of the nine symptoms measured by the ESAS. “Art provides a vehicle for expression,” says Judith Paice, PhD, RN, an author on the study. “It may be preferential to some cancer patients who may be uncomfortable with conventional psychotherapy or those who find verbal expression difficult.”

All in all, art therapy is touted for treating the whole person. And as the medical field comes to understand the mind-body connection and its healing power, Lupo says, the art therapist will be viewed as a necessary component of the medical team to effect healing.

“However, it is up to the art therapists to educate other medical professionals about the value of this intervention and to be supportive and willing to implement the goals of the medical treatment team,” says Lupo, “since in a medical setting the presenting medical issue is the priority.”

Refuge During Stress

“People respond to beauty,” says Carolyn Leith, staff specialist at the [Duke University Medical Center](#) (DUMC) in Durham, N.C. “In times of stress, people need to have a little refuge and a little space to gather strength.”



D. Krin Korke, an artist who markets primarily to healthcare facilities, says, “It’s been proven if you put bright colors up and enhance a person’s environment, productivity increases. You can’t have a totally sterile environment or people’s minds shut down a little bit.” Having art in healthcare facilities fosters conversations and interactions between employees, which may ultimately bolster morale.

Art can help provide an environment that takes the patients’ minds off of their illness and the stress that accompanies nearly any hospital stay.

“If hospitals can be nice-looking places and comfortable places, that will hopefully mitigate the other side of the hospital that is high-tech and ‘hurry up,’” Leith says.

In the early ‘80s, when the idea to decorate DUMC’s walls with art was hatched, hospital decorators wanted to buy several prints of original works and scatter them throughout the hospital. However, then director of Cultural Services, Janice Palmer, thought it would be more valuable and distinctive to have original artwork on the walls. Since that time, DUMC has amassed a collection of more than 3,500 pieces of original artwork, most created by local artists.

The Shands Hospital “Arts in Medicine Program,” directed by Graham Pole, employs poets, painters and storytellers to help facilitate the healing process for its patients. Artists who participate in the program create works of art and murals to cover the facility’s walls and ceilings.

Patch Adams says Graham-Pole “is an angel” for the work he is doing to bring art back into healthcare. However, Patch says, the work hospital officials are allowing Graham-Pole to accomplish is only a glimpse of the potential art has in healing.

Careful Selection

For healthcare facilities that try to incorporate art into the healing process, appropriate decisions for art content need to be considered. Deborah Farber, a registered art therapist and chairperson of the Art Therapy Department at the [School of the Visual Arts](#) in New York, describes one hospital that had artwork that upset its patients.

“The art they had on the walls was quite abstract and it was very disturbing to the patients,” she says. The patients in question had neurological damage that made it difficult for them to distinguish where objects began and ended.

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The undergraduate students at Farber's school were charged with the task of creating art that was not only visually appealing and realistic for the patients, but art that depicted the programs and rehabilitation in which patients partook.

"It helped the [patients] have visual markers for various clinics they needed to attend," Farber says. For clinics that focused on hand therapy, for example, the artwork incorporated hand imagery. For clinics that dealt with physical therapy, the imagery would incorporate people doing rehabilitative activities.

D. Krin Korkes, an artist who markets primarily to healthcare facilities, and owner of [Med/Art posters](#) in Morristown, N.J., says, "A lot of artwork I've noticed doesn't have any compassion or relevance to the place they're in. My art is related to the specialty of the clinic. Patients think they're neat to look at and the colors take their mind off their condition or illness. The colors are bold and stimulating and I think it helps in the healing process."

Graham-Pole supports Korkes' claim that art has the ability to aid in healing. "The effect is through endorphin release, immune function enhancement and direct effects on many and perhaps all target tissues and organs tested so far," he says. Graham-Pole adds that, while art has proven to help the healing of patients, they are not the only ones who reap the benefits.

Employee Benefits

"Art doesn't distinguish between patients and staff – 'them' and 'us,'" Graham-Pole says. Employees of hospitals, from therapists to custodians, are provided with a most aesthetically-pleasing work environment. "Art is healing to the collective community as well as each individual within it," he says. "Art has proven benefits to the body, mind and spirit of care receivers and care givers, alike."

While her paintings can't decrease a therapist's workload or increase wages, Korkes says her art can make the environment they work in more pleasant.

"It's been proven if you put bright colors up and enhance a person's environment, productivity increases. You can't have a totally sterile environment or people's minds shut down a little bit," she says. Having art in healthcare facilities fosters conversations and interactions between employees, which may ultimately bolster morale.

Growing Trend

The degree to which art is used in medicine varies depending on the facility. Adams' Gesundheit Institute in West Virginia primarily uses art and humor to treat patients. Other facilities like DUMC take a more subtle approach by decorating its walls with thousands of original works. And still others, such as Lupo's Atlantic Health Mind/Body Center, are integrating art therapy into care plans to treat patients as a "whole."

Despite the differing degrees of art in medicine, hospital administrators across the country seem to be jumping aboard the bandwagon as they realize the potential art has to help heal patients and hearten employees.

Art in medicine has only recently begun to gain respect as a viable way to heal and soothe. Some believe healthcare facilities have only taken the first step to becoming comprehensive facilities that address a patient's mind, body and soul.

When asked what the future holds, in terms of art therapy being further integrated into the medical field, Lupo says, "I see way more integration! Why? Medical art therapy is a relatively new application of the field. As the field grows – with the aid



Entitled "High Five," this portrait is part of the Med/Art Healing Collection. "The colors are bold and stimulating and I think it helps in the healing process," says Korkes.

of research studies that illustrate the benefits of art therapy in the medical setting – the field will expand, since its applications will be understood and possibly deemed as cost effective.”

Have a creative solution to enhancing patient care? [Click here](#) to visit our forum, post your response and read other therapists' advice.

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