

Art in MEDICINE

Text and photos by Prof Christopher Cheng

It was a simple watercolour painting of the lily pond in front of the main entrance; done as part of an introductory class on watercolour that we had organised for staff, patients and public. In all honesty, it was not a very good painting at all, but the technical quality mattered little to her – one of the staff of Alexandra Hospital.

“I remember this place,” she said when she saw the painting reproduced in the calendar. “I often went there to cry when I was upset. I’ll keep this precious gift for a long time.” The blurry watercolour resonated with her, bringing back hidden emotions buried for a long time, as well as tears of sadness and joy. The scene touched her deeply because it transported her far, far away.



Art is not merely a display of the artist's technical mastery or a decoration on the wall to brighten up a dull place. The artist wants to tell a story to connect with the viewer at the deepest level. When a singer brings the house down with a long-held high note, it has more to do with bringing the emotions to the audience than how high a note the singer can hit.

We were at a nursing home one mooncake festival to bring some cheer and music to the residents. After a few rounds of traditional favourite tunes where residents joined in, clapping and singing, one Indian grandma got up from her wheelchair and started singing in Mandarin and dancing. The love song about the moon momentarily transported her to a place of love – without her arthritic pain or the boredom of a care facility. The fact that we were all singing out of tune didn't

seem to matter at all. For that brief moment she was 16 years old again. Singing, dancing and drawing are the most instinctive and natural forms of human expression. There were cave paintings going back 30 thousand years. Art may be the language of humanity.

Art in medicine

Hospitals are frightening places; ambulances rushing around with sirens blaring, gates everywhere keeping people out and patients in. In the wards, alarms go off incessantly; everyone seems to be busy with their computers. Even when doctors and nurses do come round, they are forever in a hurry to go somewhere else. A patient is stripped of his/her normal routines and deprived of the simple dignity of carrying out their bodily functions in privacy. That's even before taking into account the worries and suffering arising from the illness in the first place.

Hence, the question is: "Is there a way to ease this suffering through art?"

If the investment into visual art in hospitals around the world is anything to go by, there seems to be a growing recognition that art plays an important role in healing. In the Netherlands, 7% of hospital development budget is allocated for art.

Hospital architects strive to bring some nature into the wards. Modern hospitals have windows to the "outside world", bringing in natural light even

to the intensive care units. Connection to greenery and nature certainly helps us to orientate to time and space, but plants are not human. What patients yearn for is the human touch, but sadly that's a luxury we seem to have scarcely time for. How often do we say "Hi madam/sir, here is a nice cup of Milo to make you stronger.," when we serve beverages? It certainly did not happen when I was a patient in the hospital last year. While high-touch medicine is what we strive for, safety regulations and automation are constantly putting up more and more barriers, threatening to make robots out of caregivers. Can art help to bridge this gap?

Similar to sunlight and greenery having healing properties, art can help transcend the fearful experience of a hospital stay to some place filled with hope, love and peace. For that to happen, the artist has to abandon his/her ego and instead strive to tell the story to connect with the patient. The artist has to be sensitive and open to the needs of the sick. This applies to visual artists, singers and dancers in the same way.

Art of medicine

In fact, the art in medicine is also the art of medicine. We have often lamented the erosion of the art of medicine. The failure to communicate and form trusting relationships with our patients has often been cited as the root cause of medico-legal issues. Perhaps doctors

also need to think like a healing artist. Doctors need to be sensitive and brave to bare his/her soul and be available to the patients' deepest needs. This may be frightening at first; there may be doubt of whether the doctor can cope with all the dimensions of the patients' emotional needs. Many in our profession strive to be experts in the technical aspects, but become cautious when dealing with real humanity needs, even as we trumpet the virtues of being compassionate and holistic. The technical wizardry can be a distraction to the deeper needs for both the doctor and the artist. It takes away the focus to connect with the soul.

When we connect with our patients, life is full of hope. Like the dancing lady in the nursing home, for that brief moment everything feels right, radiating possibilities. We can help transcend the daily mundane chore and pain to the sublime, where there is no suffering. There is enough to be happy about at any moment. Pain and suffering is still there but temporarily alleviated. Art helps the person look at suffering in another way.

In summary, art in medicine is a window to humanity for both the suffering patient and the compassionate doctor. For the patient, art transcends the suffering to hope and acceptance. For the doctor, it encourages our return to be the healer of more than physical pain but also of the soul. When done well, it is most fulfilling for both the artist and the doctor. ♦



Legend

1. *Sacro Monte, Italy*
2. *Morning stroll*

Prof Cheng graduated in 1982 and obtained his FRCS (Surg) in 1986 and FAMS (Urology) in 1993. He was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Sengkang General Hospital Pte Ltd, Singapore Health Services, in July 2015. He is also a Member of Board of Directors of Bright Vision Hospital from 1 September 2014. Prof Cheng is currently a senior consultant in the Department of Urology, Singapore General Hospital.

