ART & THE LONG TERM ILLNESS
Shanali Perera

Introduction

Arthritis is among one of the world’s leading causes of long-term pain and disability. In England around 15 million people live with long-term conditions. Over 10 million adults are reported to be affected by Rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders, the leading cause of the growing burden of disability in the UK.\(^1\),\(^1\)a

Is it hard “work” living with a long-term condition? Coping. Adapting. Adjusting, Fig\(^4\) Re-define the landscape of daily living. The presence of a life altering condition is a challenge by itself. The illness overtakes life with its collateral insults. The unforeseen chaos that follows can make it hard work often leading to chronic stress, depression and loss of self-esteem.

Research into the role of Art in health promotion, prevention and illness management is growing across the UK and globally.\(^3\) There is an increasing body of evidence to support the bio-psycho-social processes involved in participating in creative activities can reduce anxiety, stress and mood disturbances, in turn improving health outcomes.\(^2\),\(^3\) Art can empower and reshape life styles to better adapt to long-term conditions. It is an outlet that portrays the subjective experience of illness.

Through creativity and imagination, we find our identity and our reservoir of healing. The more we understand the relationship between creative expressions and healing, the more we will discover the healing power of the arts.\(^4\)

“The pain passes, but the beauty remains.” ~ Pierre-Auguste Renoir
Personal experience with Art

I am currently a patient under the care of Dr Ben Parker, Rheumatologist at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. I was a Rheumatology specialist trainee prior to ill health retirement 3 years ago. In 2009, I embarked on an unexpected journey by becoming a patient in my own specialty. At the time, I was in my 2nd year of training. This has been a transformative experience both professionally and personally. I gained some valuable insights into a patient’s journey after 6 years of numerous A&E and hospital admissions coupled with multiple consultations from various disciplines. To face every day struggles of a patient seemed somewhat different when sitting on the opposite side of the desk for the first time. Diseases are a black and white reality to health providers as the focus falls mainly on diagnosis, classification and management. Where as the experience of illness is a reality with many shades of grey to the patient.

Losing self-esteem and control slowly creeps up, starting to affect everything you do. Feeling powerless most of the time becomes part and parcel with the variability in symptoms, the unpredictable course of the condition, the disruption of one’s previous routine and functional independence. With the balance tipping over gradually with work, financial constraints and home stresses, every aspect of your life is suddenly over shadowed with a new constant looming in the background – the condition/diagnosis/illness whatever you choose to name it. It doesn’t take long to start feeling isolated and stray off course, loosing sight of self-identity. Creativity gives something to take control of and construct a positive identity. I have symptoms in my hands, arms and legs, which come on with function. As this can be rather limiting I used both my hands to do digital art creations. I found the use of artistic expression a means of self-exploration to convey how I was feeling. This really helped me to keep the fun side alive and regain a degree of control.

“Variety of form and brilliancy of colour in the object presented to patients are an actual means of recovery.”
~ Florence Nightingale
**Self-exploration through Art**

The idea that creative expression can make a powerful contribution to the healing process has been embraced in many different cultures. Throughout recorded history, people have used pictures, stories, dances, and chants as healing rituals. The creation of circular designs has been part of spiritual practices around the world for centuries. The Tibetan Wheel of Time, which symbolically illustrates the entire structure of the universe, is an example of one of the circular forms used for visual meditation in Eastern cultures. Prehistoric Stonehenge monument in England and the 13th century labyrinth at the base of Chartres Cathedral in France are examples of circular forms in the West. Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung was one of the earliest founders in modern depth Psychology, credited with connecting colouring to relaxation. It was his view that these circular shapes representing typically symmetrical, repetitive or geometric designs were a calming shape to draw and colour.

The action of colouring involves both sides of the brain. The Left is responsible for logic involved in forming colours and the right for creativity, when mixing and matching colours. The whole process involved in composing visual art stimulates imagination, incorporates areas of the brain responsible for vision, memory and fine motor skills, ultimately leading to relaxation and mindfulness. Recent studies looking at physiological recordings using electroencephalography and brain imaging techniques such as PET and fMRI have allowed us to gain a better understanding of the brain mechanisms important in visual creativity.

A study done by Reynolds and Prior in chronic illness patients demonstrated that art filled occupational voids, distracted thoughts of illness and maintained a positive identity. They also showed improvements in flow, spontaneity and social networking. Its value was conceptualised by one participant as a 'lifestyle coat-hanger' organising numerous further roles and activities that gave purpose to life. Art was more than cathartic. It offered a versatile means of overcoming the restrictions imposed by illness on self and lifestyle, in many cases creating a more enriched lifestyle than before.

Another study examining pain in 50 adult cancer in-patients following a 1 hour art therapy session showed statistically significant reductions in the measured symptoms thus demonstrating the efficacy of art therapy in reducing a broad spectrum of symptoms in these patients.

A recent investigation looking at the relationship between discrete positive emotions and immune mediators found activities that inspire awe was the strongest predictor of lowering levels of inflammation. This work suggests a potential biological pathway between positive emotions and health. 

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life" - Pablo Picasso
Use of Art therapy in the UK

A wide range of art and well being projects focusing on patients with long term conditions mainly involving mental health, depression, cancer, children, young adults and neurological disorders are currently taking place in various parts of the UK and internationally.

The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) is the professional organisation for art therapists in the UK. It works to promote art therapy within various national organisations. The Teapot Trust is a charity that is dedicated to providing professional art therapy to children coping with chronic illness. They focus on supporting children suffering from complex Rheumatological diseases, covering a variety of clinical settings including outpatient clinics, hospital wards and hospices.\(^9\)

Launched in 2012, The National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing is committed to promoting the role of the creative arts in health care. They developed a charter that states the arts and humanities have a crucial role to play in medical training, clinician wellbeing and awareness to achieve a holistic approach to patient care; the arts help us to see and value the patient as a whole person, not just an illness or symptom.\(^{10}\)

UK’s longest established arts and health organisation is Arts for Health at Manchester Metropolitan University. As one of the pioneers of research into the relationship between the arts and healthcare since the 1970s, it is working with Arts Council England and the Department of Health collaborating with a range of international partners to better understand the impact of creativity, culture and the arts on health and well-being.\(^{12}\)

Fig. 2
Copyright © 2015 Shanali Perera

“Colour provokes a psychic vibration. Colour hides a power still unknown but real, which acts on every part of the human body.”
~ Wassily Kandinsky
Conclusion

Using art to demonstrate the many facets of emotions and degrees of pain a patient may feel at various points can be an effective non-verbal tool to communicate and connect with family, friends and health providers. This form of self-expression is a refuge for coping with sudden changes from familiar to the new unfamiliar aspects of routine functions. Fig 2

The role of the arts in healing complements the biomedical view by focusing not only on sickness and symptoms but the holistic nature of the person bringing emotional, somatic, artistic, and spiritual dimensions to learning.4

Art is a tool to explore and develop, considering its use in the non-medical approaches to self-management of long-term illnesses. A wealth of studies illustrates its potential therapeutic benefits. There is scope to promote the use of digital medium for people with functional limitations due to Rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions.

If we can improve the living experience to a more pleasant degree through creative processes - why not explore our creative side to meet every day challenges posed by a long-term condition. From my own experience this can be a constructive as well as an enjoyable pursuit.

“Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see.” ~ Paul Klee

Correspondence to
shanaliperera@gmail.com

Reference