



Alexandra Coulter

Alexandra Coulter has been Director of Art & Health South West since 2010. Before that she managed the Arts in Hospital project at Dorset County Hospital for 15 years and worked as a free lance arts and health consultant in the acute and primary care sectors. And before that she was an artist! Arts & Health South West is the lead organisation for a new national body, the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance.

Alex provides the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing and she project-managed a two-year Inquiry into Arts, Health and Wellbeing. The inquiry report 'Creative Health' was launched in Parliament in July 2017.

by ANA M. VERNIA

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Ana M. Vernia *What comes to mind when you think about art and health?*

Alexandra Coulter People involved in the arts, do not usually think much, in my experience, about evaluation and results, in the way that people who work in health do. I think this is the most challenging aspect of arts and health. In the field of health, they need a lot of evidence, it's their way of working, because there is also a much greater risk. Artists do not usually think that there is a risk in what we do; the field of health is more scientific.

I really think that art helps us to be more human, and that it gives us the possibility to express our creativity. It goes much further. In health, they are becoming more aware of attending to the whole needs of people, to their wellbeing and in this, art is fundamental.

AV *Do you think doctors are aware of the potential of art?*

AC Currently I see many doctors, who are very interested in this field, with a lot of interest in arts and health. We are in a situation where health is subject to economic difficulties. General practitioners say that 30% of patients do not have problems that are medical. It is important for doctors to listen to their patients, although they have very little time to do so, because often the solution is not drugs.

In the reports on the social determinants, such as poverty, housing, education, nutrition, etc. we see that they directly influence health. Doctors understand that financial resources should be used for health interventions, but they now also understand that prevention is fundamental. They need to understand the patient in a holistic way, taking into account all the factors that may directly or indirectly affect health.

For example, older people do not have only one disease, they can have communication problems and be experiencing loneliness. I believe that art can be a part of the solution, but this requires a big change in attitude.

AV In your point of view, art can be a remedy to disease?

AC We have to think less about the medical solution for health problems, focusing more on artistic activities that will enable patients to connect with themselves and with others. We can see that art could be a preventive activity, for example, in dementia, which would also have a positive economic impact. Although it is very complicated, because economic resources are not distributed equally, according to needs.

Politics and health are very powerful in comparison to art. However, I feel that we are in a good moment for change. I believe that in Spain, it is also necessary to look for new ways that allow these approaches. Informing politicians is important.

AV The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) was formed in 2014 and aims to improve awareness of the benefits that the arts can bring to health and wellbeing. During 2015–17, the APPGAHW conducted an Inquiry into practice and research in the arts in health and social care, with a view to making recommendations to improve policy and practice. Following that report, what actions have been taken in the UK?

AC In this parliamentary group, we had 16 discussion round tables with artists, academics, patients, clinicians, managers and politicians, looking at health and art issues, such as dementia, mental health, social care, etc. The new Secretary of State for Health was previously the Secretary of State for Culture, and he is very open to listening to our recommendations.

Another problem related to the quality of life is loneliness, it is said that loneliness has a worse impact on health than smoking 10 cigarettes a day.

AV But, there is a contradiction in this? because it is recommended that elderly people should delay their entry into the residences, in order to be autonomous much longer, which gives them independence and better quality of life.

AC Yes, I understand that, but, even if they are at home, they should be independent, but it is necessary to have contact with their neighbours. We now have a Minister who is responsible for loneliness, even if it sounds strange. Art can connect you, allow

you not to be alone, you can also connect with others and with yourself, as passive and active art, actively participate, paint, make music, sing ...

Social Prescribing is a service that recommends to patients social activities such as art, when a medical solution, such as a drug, is not appropriate or helpful. They might have breathing problems or be in the early stages of dementia, or have depression or anxiety.

Connection is very important, confidence, self-esteem, through art, and it is also fun. There are dance programmes for the prevention of falls. This is more fun than exercising. Another example is with children who do not want to take their medication for diabetes, because they are ashamed. There is a film made by young people using dance and music, through which they tell their own age-group why it is important to take their diabetes medication.

I believe that we are in a moment of re-balancing our society and there is a lot of scientific evidence that art has great potential for health and quality of life. On the other hand, at school, we are reducing the amount of art that children can do which I consider a great mistake, it's the wrong way to go.

All people can be creative and it is also a human right to have access to the arts. There are some who may have more ability, but it should be a part of daily life.

AV Do you think that politicians know the potential of the arts?

AC I believe that politicians do have some knowledge of the potential of the arts, but they do not consider it essential for life. Although they go to concerts, they may play an instrument, but they aren't necessarily aware that art can have a positive effect on people. The experience is fundamental, not only for politicians, but also for doctors, so they can understand how art can have an impact with patients.

AV Thank you very much for your attention and your time for ARTSEDUCA.♦