A Therapeutic Waiting Room: Medical Students Run an Art Group for Vulnerable Populations

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**ABSTRACT**

Medical students at UBC’s Island Medical Program run an art group in the waiting room of the Victoria Cool Aid Society’s Access Health Clinic in downtown Victoria, B.C. This program aims to create a calm and inclusive environment by providing art materials, companionship, and safe space for populations affected by chronic illness, homelessness, mental illness and addiction, all within a familiar space: the waiting room. It appears that this relaxing space contributes to increased well-being and provides a positive outlet for expression through writing, drawing, painting and knitting. For medical students, the program facilitates growth through interacting with people from a variety of marginalized populations.

KEYWORDS: waiting, art, therapy, vulnerable, student

The Victoria Cool Aid Society’s Access Health Clinic in downtown Victoria provides primary health care for vulnerable populations affected by chronic illness, homelessness, mental illness and addiction. The medical waiting room for many patients can be an uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking environment, as patients and medical staff have informed us. Ms. Anne Droste, a registered nurse at the clinic, envisioned an art group in the waiting room to alleviate patients’ anxieties. In January 2012, two students from the Island Medical Program (IMP), one of UBC Medicine’s distributed sites, began working in partnership with the Cool Aid Society on this community service learning project to make Ms. Droste’s vision a reality. Once a week they met in the reception area of the clinic and hosted a drop-in arts and crafts group, named IMPart, and they passed the project to us (the authors) who were drawn to the link between health and humanities. With time, participation in IMPart has grown. We continue to draw patients referred by the doctors and nurses at the clinic, as well as new participants who enter the clinic to pick up medications and harm reduction resources.

IMPart aims to create a calming and inclusive environment by providing art materials, companionship and a safe space for patients to talk, relax, eat healthy snacks and express themselves in creative ways, all within a familiar space: the waiting room. The patients are able to benefit from the therapeutic nature of art and are empowered to express their thoughts, feelings and frustrations. We strive to provide companionship, validation, and comfort for a marginalized population, for whom access to leisurely activities such as art are beyond reach. It appears that this relaxing space contributes to increased well-being and provides a positive outlet for expression through writing, drawing, painting and knitting.

On a typical day at IMPart, a patient will walk into the clinic and be greeted by the IMPart volunteers, who set up in the middle of the waiting room. Patients are sometimes shy at first, as they explain to us that they are ashamed of their lack of artistic talent and may elect to sit at the periphery to watch. With time, many are drawn to the various activities and enjoyable conversations in which IMPart engages. Colouring books and knitting have proven to be particularly popular activities, across all ages and genders. Many patients become so engaged that they choose to return to their projects after the appointment. Participants are often proud of their artistic accomplishments; the pieces frequently become the centerpieces of conversation that facilitate social interaction between many people who regularly face loneliness and isolation. Aside from being a creative outlet, IMPart serves to create a welcoming, supportive environment.

IMPart has been well received with several participants returning on a weekly basis. Many have voiced their appreciation for the opportunity to be creative, both to the student volunteers and to the staff at the clinic. One participant explained to us: “I just leave all of my troubles behind.” In addition to positive feedback such as this, the positive experience has not been one sided. This program has provided us medical students with invaluable learning opportunities. IMPart has brought attention to the assumptions we make and how important open-mindedness and empathy can be in providing care. For example, one woman shared her story of unemployment. An unfortunate series of events led to her losing her job. Unable to pay the rent, she was evicted from her residence with nowhere to go. After exhausting all of her social capital, she ended up on the street. The shocking part for us was how mundane the circumstances were; this woman’s descent
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into homelessness could have happened to anyone. Hearing this story and many others of its kind has helped to bridge the gap left by the “us-them” thinking vulnerable populations often face in our society. Being involved in this project has allowed us to expand our knowledge and experiences. We have had the great fortune of learning about diverse social circumstances, barriers to health and experiences to which we would not have otherwise been exposed, in the form of stories, narratives and artwork. We have witnessed the transformation that can take place in a waiting space through the development of community and artistic expression.

The idea of a waiting room used as preparation for, or as adjunct to, the therapeutic process between patient and provider is not a novel one, and there is a growing body of a research in the effective use and importance of the waiting space. A study published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology found that the perceived quality of care of a clinic is significantly affected by the waiting room environment.1 Offices that are nicely furnished, well-lit, contain artwork, and are warm in appearance are associated with greater perceived quality of care.

The power of art, especially in outreach to vulnerable populations such as those affected by homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse, has been recognized for some time. A qualitative study by the Occupational Therapy Australia demonstrated that participation in art programs provided a starting point for participation in community and a positive experience that encourages the construction of new identities, routines and roles.2 Art provides an outlet for expression, public recognition, and social inclusion; it is our observation that this empowerment for marginalized individuals can increase their confidence in a setting that may be stressful and frightening, and may increase their likelihood of returning to the clinic.

This model of a therapeutic waiting room holds great promise for improving the patient experience and nurturing patients from all walks of life. Both our experiences and our research have shown us the power of the waiting room transformation from a sterile space into a healing community. Our experience with this program has provided us with concrete examples of how health and well-being extend far beyond the walls of the examination room. In the future, we would like to see similar programs put in place to both increase the therapeutic effects of the waiting room, and to increase empathy and compassion among medical students.3

REFERENCES
