



The arts as a path to recovery

Marie-Dominique Beaulieu MD MSc CCMF FCMF

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.

George Eliot

What do the Artist in Residence Program at the Sherbrooke Community Centre in Saskatoon, Sask, and the *Garage à musique* in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve in Montreal, Que, have in common? Both are community initiatives that use the arts to help vulnerable people—older people with decreased autonomy and underprivileged children, respectively—to find balance by fostering their resilience and feelings of social inclusion. These were the types of initiatives discussed at the Power of the Arts National Forum organized by the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, to which I was invited as a representative of the CFPC.* The goal of this forum was to produce a national strategy outlining ways in which all sectors of Canadian society can promote inclusion, social cohesion, and prosperity through the arts. What do the arts and family medicine have in common?

Family physicians see the effects of social inequities on our patients' lives every day. We know that many people are born into conditions that compromise their chances of realizing their full potential and staying healthy. Recent data published by the Canadian Medical Association are hard-hitting: 50% of a population's health can be attributed to social and economic environment and only 25% to the "restorative" effect of our health system—our work as physicians.¹ Poverty, unsanitary living conditions, and domestic violence are our main enemies. As family physicians, we also know that disease, and especially mental illness, can lead to isolation and vulnerability, doubly compromising patients' chances of recovery. Directly combating social inequities is therefore a priority of our College and of family physicians across Canada. In addition to individual or community actions, we also help offset the effects of social inequities by being accessible to our patients, as access to primary care is a factor in health equity.

The effect of social determinants on health is not only direct.² The feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, low self-esteem, and anger generated by these vulnerable situations have an equal, if not greater, effect on health. Studies have shown an association between anger and aggression and the risk of cardiovascular disease; between

stress and diabetes management; and between feelings of hopelessness and weakening of the immune system. What is interesting and encouraging is that the quality of the social fabric and the feeling of belonging reduce the effect of social determinants on health.²

Art can be an instrument of social inclusion, expression, and empowerment—a redefinition of personal identity. Art can be an antidote to hopelessness, anger, and lack of meaning. While many experiments have demonstrated the power of the arts as an instrument of social rehabilitation with various marginalized populations, including aboriginal communities, research on the effect of the arts on mental and physical health is in its early days. The findings are interesting.³ For example, it has been found that participating in artistic activities generates complex brain activity that can stimulate the growth of new neurons in the cerebral cortex. Taking part in artistic activities has been associated with better mental health outcomes. Exposure to music or the visual arts has been associated with reduced anxiety, pain, and length of hospital stay in various populations (oncology, surgery, geriatric medicine).

Our role as family physicians is to help people stay healthy and recover from illness or from the harmful effects of social inequities. I like the concept of *recovery* that was initially proposed in mental health, but which can be applied to any health problem, be it caused by disease or social inequality. Recovery does not mean a cure, but rather finding a new balance through adaptation, a renewed sense of well-being, and a redefinition of personal identity.⁴ Recovery means taking charge of your life. Our treatments are completely powerless here and it is through our empathy, ability to listen, and respect that we can help our patients recover. And what if the arts were one of our tools? I believe family physicians are in a good position to advance knowledge on the contribution of the arts to individual and population health. After all, art is the nearest thing to life, as George Eliot put it so well. 🌿

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*This article is based on the talk given by the author at the Power of the Arts National Forum on September 28, 2013.

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