



Art for the sake of medicine

Sarah Fraser MSc MD CCFP

Many places in Canada are suffering from a family doctor shortage. Adding seats to residency programs and increasing incentives for primary health providers might help to some degree. However, these interventions will not immediately solve the family physician shortage and distribution problem, nor are they likely to solve the many social issues facing our patients every day.

An individual's health depends on much more than access to medical care. It depends on the underlying social and economic conditions in which they live. Accessible medical care facilities are critical, but too often poor health arises from poverty and marginalization. Many of us are uncomfortably familiar with cases where families must balance the cost of medication with that of rent or food for children.

Does art need a purpose?

One way to have an effect on social issues is through art. Numerous writers have argued that art must serve a social or educational purpose, and that it should be used as a platform for change. This is the case with the poem "Easter, 1916" by William Butler Yeats. With reference to Ireland's Easter Rising, after the revolutionary leaders were killed, he describes the country:

Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Another outlook on the concept of art is art for the sake of itself, *l'art pour l'art*, as described by the 19th-century French artist Théophile Gautier. Gautier and others in the art-for-art's-sake camp argue that art does not need a purpose; rather, it can exist on its own. It can be enjoyed or it can elicit discomfort, but it does not always have to carry meaning. Abstract paintings come to mind.

However, in his work *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche argues against the concept of *l'art pour l'art*, describing it as "a worm chewing its own tail." He adds, "Art is the great stimulus to life: how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as *l'art pour l'art*?"¹

Perhaps the 2 frameworks are not mutually exclusive. Beyoncé and Jay-Z recently released a music video filmed in the Louvre. They performed in front of famous paintings

including Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. At first glance the production seems like art for art's sake, but there is more to the story. An analysis of the video was recently published in *Time*, in which an art historian describes the production as a "black feminist intervention."²

Health, humanity, empathy

Art might also have a health benefit. Research led by Cuypers et al³ found that not only creatively producing art, but also consuming art, was associated with better perceived mental and physical health. These results were apparent even when adjusted for socioeconomic and other relevant factors. Although the study was based on self-reported views of health and life satisfaction rather than health outcomes, it does provide an interesting view on the benefits of art.

The field of health is one that is often stretched to its limits. Our system, and sometimes ourselves, might at times feel like a branch ready to break. Art can be a way to help us to keep humanity and empathy, to reflect on what we do and why we do it. A recent study found that participation in the humanities reduced burnout and helped to maintain empathy in American medical students.⁴

Whether you see art as serving a health or a social purpose versus simply existing for the sake of itself, we hope that you continue to enjoy the Art of Family Medicine in *Canadian Family Physician*. The sculptor and painter Romero Britto said, "Art is too important not to share."⁵ The Art of Family Medicine is a space where we can share it, perhaps for the sake of medicine. 🌿

Dr Fraser is an author and a family physician practising in Antigonish, NS, and the new Section Editor for the Art of Family Medicine in *Canadian Family Physician*.

Competing interests

None declared

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Contributions to the Art of Family Medicine can be submitted at mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cfp for consideration.

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