

Bisakha Sarker, Artistic Director, Chaturangan South Asian Dance.

BISAKHA SARKER MBE is a dance artist and the artistic director of Chaturangan, an arts organisation engaged in a diverse range of creative activities to raise the profile of South Asian dance for health and wellbeing. She is a performer, producer, choreographer, researcher, educationalist and writer. Bisakha has extensive experience of working with South Asian dance and art in different health settings e.g. hospitals, care homes and community projects. Her company, in partnership with other universities and art centres, has organised a number of landmark national and international dance conferences on topics like 'Dance and Ageing' and 'Dance and Dementia' establishing a new style of artist-led conference programming. Bisakha, a Churchill Fellow, is featured in The Artist in Time. (2020, Baring Foundation).

'Exchange'

As this is a conference discussing the place of arts in the care, health and the wellbeing of people, particularly brain health, I thought I would start by placing arts at the heart of my presentation. That was a dance based on a poem by a Canadian poet, Robert Bringhurst. It will speak to you in its own terms, offering multiple layers of meaning. My faith in the use of arts in the welfare of people waiting for diagnosis comes as much from the research papers as from poetry, literature, and actual experience of doing workshops in various health settings.

'The mind appears to be what the mind thinks of', said Bringhurst. That reminds me that mind is at the centre of everything that we do, so it must be kept stimulated. Usually, we go through life being transported from one task to another, time flies. But one time when the time does not fly is when one waits for a diagnosis. Time looms large. Time fills with anxiety. One loses motivation and feels scared to hope. Waiting takes away our control. Mind drifts without an anchor. Art offers dreams and gives permission to enter a world of imagination where one can feel being in control.

What art proposes may not be a cure, but it gives precious, fleeting maybe, moments of happiness. A sense of regaining the control. The art can give the gift of a few moments away from the grip of fear and thoughts of what if. In this context, I strongly believe that Indian dance has a lot to offer, it has a rich vocabulary of hand gestures which can be used creatively. It has also got the story telling element which can open scope of improvisation, and a journey into one's vision. This dance connects the body and mind. Any art does that. You apply one's agency, and you get the satisfaction from being able to do something. I think I

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have built my case here. I would like to quote a matron of a hospice who said, 'In between the treatments and diagnosis, much of the autonomy is lost, a session of dance and movement can allow all to put aside sufferings, to enter another space.' Thank you.

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VFG: Thank you, Bisakha. Bisakha ran a programme of South Asian dance for people with early stage of dementia when I first started A4D ten years ago. The hand movement surmounted use of language. We now welcome Professor John Gallacher, Professor of Cognitive Health, University of Oxford, and Director of Dementias Platform UK to chair the conference this morning.

