

Christopher Bailey, Arts and Health Lead, World Health Organisation.

CHRISTOPHER BAILEY is the Arts and Health Lead at the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO). In his younger days he was a professional actor, playwright and director based in New York City before going into philanthropy and public health. Educated at Columbia and Oxford Universities as well as the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, after a tour as the head of Knowledge Management at the Rockefeller Foundation, Bailey has spent the better part of the last two decades at WHO creating their informatics program, leading their web team, and now spearheading the Arts and Health programme. He recently co-produced [Healing Arts London](#) which featured a session on dementia. The Arts and Health program supports the research agenda on arts and health, innovative community-based arts interventions for health, as well as projects with the global media.

I just wanted to complement Muir on his presentation, I found it wonderful. It gave me a lot of food for thought, I am certainly going to be using ideas that he put forward. I am going to apologise in advance. I am severely visually impaired. I have got terminal glaucoma, so my vision is less than 5% of normal. What I am going to do is talk a little bit about the evidence base for arts in dementia care and prevention, then about what is not captured in evidence, but is captured in our experience.

On the evidence base, the last time I had worked with Veronica, I had invited her to an event I had hosted with University College London on dementia, as part of our Healing Arts initiative. We had people living with dementia, arts therapists, neurologists, researchers, coming together to discuss what was the state of dementia. One of the unintended benefits of that session was that it caught the attention of our mental health department here at the WHO. This year we are revising our global strategy on mental health at WHO, historically, there have been a number of different demographics and groups that have not been included.

Following that event, they asked me to look into the question of can arts be of therapeutic benefit to people living with dementia. I commissioned a research review from the [New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development](#). I headed up a global research alliance to look at this question.

So very briefly, some of the high-level preliminary summaries. This is ongoing, we haven't finished yet. We looked at question of the arts and the creative therapeutic use of the arts in dementia in terms of

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prevention, treatment, and looking at various aspects of it. What we found after looking at seven different databases between 2015–21, and screening 348 systematic reviews, of which 83 studies met our criteria for weightiness of the evidence to include in the study. We found that only one actually addressed the issues of prevention. What that tells us is that we do not have the evidence base yet for using the arts to prevent dementia, but it does tell us that this is a key area of future research. I think that is important.

What did it tell us? Of all the studies, over 60% of them dealt with music therapies, other creative arts representing 10-12% of the other categories. In all the areas that we looked at, from behavioural to the psychological symptoms of dementia, to cognitive functioning, to mood, to wellbeing, to social connectedness – all found some improvement. So there does seem to be a growing and more confident body of evidence to suggest that the arts have a key aspect to play in the role of managing dementia, slowing its progression, and most importantly, making sure that within this journey, that life is worth living. I think that is the most important aspect.

To segue to something which Muir touched on, and what I think is the most important part of using the arts. Yes, we can look at measurable levels (cortisol levels, stress levels etc.) or indicators that can show what medical benefits can be derived from engaging in the arts. But at the end of the day what we are really talking about finding meaning in something which is inherently meaningless. This is indeed a creative act. When a bird dies in nature, it is a random act, but when we look at it from the point of view of our sense making ability or creative ability, then suddenly there is a special province in it.

We have many books out there on how to be healthy, and many different opinions, guidelines and databases on how to do that. But we don't have books on how to be sick. I think that's an important aspect. In my life I have had two major health issues, the first was managing a cancer diagnosis. A few years ago, I was given a 50% survival probability. I was able to make it through that. Afterwards I was diagnosed with terminal glaucoma and lost the majority of my vision. It is easy to fall into despair. When we talk about moving from tragedy to hope, what we are not talking about is super imposing a false Hollywood ending. What we are talking about is using our creative abilities to find meaning in that journey.

In my case, I see a particular kinship with dementia patients. There is a particular form of Alzheimer's that affects the visual cortex. As I began to work with different patients, particularly those with this rare

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condition, one of the things that I discovered is that their view of the world is extremely similar to mine. The difference is, my visual cortex is physically fine, it is my optic nerve that is degenerating. In their case their visual cortex is damaged, but the optic nerve is fine. But we see the world in identical ways. Similarly, in both cases, our brains, using that neural plasticity, began to use the other senses to try and make up the difference. The biology of that is virtually identical. What happened in both our cases was that what began as a fearful time, of losing our ability to relate and engage in the world. Going through the different phases of death, of sadness, anger, denial, bargaining and eventually acceptance, beyond acceptance, was what I like to call transcendence or transfiguration. Where you find the meaning and the beauty of what you have gained in this journey, not just what you have lost. That is not a given, that is something you actually have to try and achieve.

What I have found with Alzheimer's patients and myself, is that when we lost our vision, not only were we able to process the world through soundscapes, smell, through touch, but the deep silence of darkness and contemplation put us into a space that was different than the visual world. So, when you for instance savour a glass of vintage red wine, you might voluntarily close your eyes. When you willingly close your eyes to embody a beautiful piece of music, when you close your eyes to better experience the gentle slope of a lover's forearm, so do we accept the closing of our eyes, to better share this moment with you. To me, that is the healing power of arts.

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