

SIDEBAR: For over twelve years, Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Florida, has been the home of Arts in Medicine, an international leader in the arts and healthcare movement. Created in the early nineties by pediatric oncologist/poet John Graham-Pole and nurse/artist Mary Rockwood Lane, A.I.M. brings the arts into the hospital setting in a variety of ways, from its weekly performance series in the lobby to dancing and drawing at the bedside. A.I.M. has grown from its inception, which brought one artist part-time onto one unit, to a core group of twelve artists in residence supporting and monitoring up to 100 volunteers annually.

MUSIC: THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF HEALING

By Cathy DeWitt • All Rights Reserved • ©2004

Published in Natural Awakenings magazine and in Connections, the online newsletter for the Society for the Arts in Healthcare.

As the Musician in Residence for Shands Arts in Medicine program in Gainesville, Florida, for over ten years, I have seen and experienced the healing power of music in just about every kind of hospital setting. From the waiting room to the bedside, from the O.R. to the E.R., from pediatrics to geriatrics, from an auditorium full of caregivers to a small family holding vigil for their loved one, music has proved to be an amazingly effective, accessible and immediate tool for healing.

Just one song can completely alter a patient's mood. Countless times I've had the nurse step into the room and say, "Look at the improvement in those vitals!" after singing a song with the patient. I've had a child who was curled up in pain start strumming the small harp I held in front of him, then sit up and continue strumming wordlessly for ten minutes, eyes shining, his pain forgotten. I've had families visiting separate patients who were roommates, with the curtain closed between them, open the curtain to join together in song, and continue singing after I left the room.

Music brings dramatic results to patients who have Alzheimer's, dementia, and other memory disorders. Patients who have not spoken a coherent sentence in weeks (according to the staff) may be able to sing along with entire songs. Patients who have a flat affect and sit slumped in their wheelchairs become animated and start moving. And sometimes, singing these songs actually triggers something in the mind that makes it suddenly possible for the patient to remember and speak of a past experience.

Oliver Sacks, noted author and expert neurologist, explains: "... a stroke or dementia can cause aphasia, the inability to use or comprehend words. But the ability to sing words is rarely affected, even if an aphasic cannot speak them. Being reminded in this way of words and grammatical constructions they have forgotten...may help them start to regain old neural pathways for accessing language...Music then becomes a crucial first step in a sequence followed by spontaneous improvement and speech therapy."(1)

I have had at least one experience where I followed a patient throughout this entire sequence. Although I generally see patients only for the time period that they are in the hospital, there have been cases where I followed up on their progress in other settings, often a rehab center or hospice. H. was a patient with severe brain injury from an accident. After being in a coma for nearly a year she had recovered enough to be placed

in various hospital rehabilitation settings, but still had problems with memory and with speaking coherently. She would insert nonsense words into sentences that otherwise made sense. She was middle-aged and had been a successful professional psychologist. Cindy, the speech therapist, was interested in how music might affect her. When I asked H. what her favorite song was, she said “Jingle Bells.” So, I started singing with her--first Jingle Bells, then Elvis and the Beatles and Motown as she began to remember other songs she liked. She seemed to get more coherent every time I saw her, and soon Cindy was having all of the staff sing with her as much as possible. Eventually she was well enough to be sent to off-site Rehab. I went there to visit her and she was completely with it--she knew everybody's name, remembered me, remembered the accident, her family, everything. She was getting ready to go home, and said she was nervous and scared, which certainly seemed appropriate to me.

These days there is so much research and scientific evidence that more and more people are beginning to believe in the healing qualities of music. But this is something that's been going on since ancient times. Whether it was David playing on his harp or shamanic healers drumming the demons out, it was noted early on that “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.”

Be it a rock concert, an opera, a sing-along in a nursing home, or at the bedside, sharing music brings people together—energetically, physically and emotionally. It creates a sense of community and connection. Even the most isolated and withdrawn people have an opportunity to become aware of others, and of the experience they are sharing. Barbara Crowe, past president of the National Association for Music Therapy, says, “Therapeutic music can make the difference between withdrawal and awareness, between isolation and interaction, between chronic pain and comfort—between demoralization and dignity.” This is indeed a powerful tool to bring to the healthcare setting, and one that I feel privileged to carry with me wherever I go.