



# Art in Health Communication: Bridging the Gap between Patients and Providers

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## ABSTRACT

Effective communication between patients and healthcare providers is critical for achieving positive health outcomes. However, cultural, emotional, and linguistic barriers often impede this process. Art offers a transformative medium to enhance health communication, fostering mutual understanding and empathy. This paper examines how various art forms, including visual art, music, and storytelling, can bridge gaps in health communication by facilitating emotional expression and conveying complex experiences. It highlights the therapeutic benefits of integrating art into healthcare settings and presents case studies demonstrating its impact. The discussion includes practical strategies for implementing art in clinical environments and outlines research opportunities to optimize its application. By leveraging art, healthcare providers can create more patient-centered care experiences, improving both patient satisfaction and provider empathy.

**Keywords:** Health communication, Patient-centered care, Art in healthcare, Therapeutic communication, Visual art.

## INTRODUCTION

Healthcare does not exist in a vacuum. Although we may like to think it does, unencumbered by personal problems, questions, and frustrations, the reality is that it does not. All those issues come right along, and it is those issues in addition to symptoms and treatments that people in a healthcare setting face daily. Patients express these weighty issues in various ways, and in order for providers to help alleviate those burdens (physical, emotional, and mental), they must first understand those expressions. Effective health communication takes both diagnostic and therapeutic communication from theoretical concepts to practical application in healthcare. Art has the potential to serve as another tool in the health communication toolbox, specifically by helping bridge the gap between patients and providers. This idea has merit in two interconnected ways. First, there are therapeutic benefits both to patients and to providers that can be achieved through art. Second, art can help healthcare professionals to better understand patients and thus provide more patient-centered care [1, 2]. When talking about art as a way to help patients get their story across, involve them more directly in their own charting, or simply provide an emotional release, many people think first of music or dance and maybe visual expression. The elemental concept, though, holds for storytelling, drawing, or any number of other forms an artistic expression might take. Visual aids in general can be very beneficial in healthcare settings, facilitating communication between patients and providers and between a healthcare patient and their caregivers. The arts offer us another way to see inside the raw stuff of our emotions in order to make connections with them. Art provides a bridge between the inside—the feeling—and the outside, to create some expression of or symbol for that feeling [3, 4].

### The Impact of Art on Patient-Provider Communication

Art can be used as a tool for communication among patients, family, friends, and medical providers. By exposing themselves to the arts, patients and providers alike open up possibilities for communication and understanding that may not have been attainable without artistic expression. As a form of visual and

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representational communication, the arts provide a less threatening method for patients with less fluency in a culture of medicine to express themselves. Medical providers who also have varying degrees of fluency within multiple cultures must often negotiate with patients who are even less versed in the language of medicine. Visual art and the art of music similarly have the capacity to express what current language cannot. Art and music express experience, emotion, and information that cannot be put into words. The arts serve as complementary tools to our language of medicine, drawing on forms of expression that stretch across broad cultural and social boundaries. Individuals within the arts can often express in a few notes or gestures much that would be difficult to put into words. Research has begun to demonstrate the power of expressive therapies in facilitating dialogue, openness, connection, change, transformation, and healing. It has been shown that engagement in visual art, music, or play can be as effective as words in articulating needs, ideas, and perspectives. For people who consider themselves poor verbal communicators, such alternative means of expression can enable a different way of making connections and communication. Patients appear to express strong feelings of support and understanding from health professionals who work in ways that are unusual or less familiar. Some have directly conducted experiments in which they have found that the use of the arts increases the level of social science data that is collected [5, 6].

### **Incorporating Art in Healthcare Settings**

Practical strategies to bring art into a healthcare environment can be easily adopted. Film, audio-visual, as well as different art forms can be implemented. These could range from large-scale installations, sound works, sculpture, projection, moving images, drawing, and painting, with a preference for non-fragile, durable, and non-toxic materials. Art can also be an effective means of patient communication, and health promotion, and provide an alternative way to reflect on the experience of health and healthcare. This can lead to improved levels of empathy, expressive authenticity, reassurance, and better emotional containment of difficult communication in healthcare settings [7, 8]. Art can be experienced within a healthcare setting in a number of ways: in the waiting area, in consulting rooms, or in treatment spaces. In the following years, governments and NGOs funded the exhibition of art for healthcare treatments. Specially designed annual awards encourage the promotion of an open call to artists, which is then juried with artists collaborating with health professionals to ensure that the needs of the patients will be met. Projects exist for works that can be installed on walls within a clinical setting and play a significant part in healthcare design, landscape design, or architectural and public art projects. A recent series of exhibitions showing artwork in hospital and healthcare chaplaincy settings was seen as a first step towards delivering more permanent artwork of the highest standard in healthcare chaplaincy. The logistics for all of these are extensive, ranging from artwork to installation resources for packing and transport. It is usually good practice to stipulate very stringent working requirements detailing insurance, working hours, communication strategies, and discharge planning. Therapy through art is a good way to provide emotional support for patients with cancer. Art helps people get in touch with emotions and feelings and creates a safe way to communicate personal thoughts. Art therapy can reduce stress and anxiety and improve mood and feelings of well-being in patients taking part. Art can provide an emotional and creative experience that is beneficial to patients with all types of cancer. A professional working partnership between the Trust and an artist has been developed through a facilities plan as part of a capital art project at the new extension of RSCH. The partnership began originally as an artist-in-residence partnership with the radiotherapy team. The role of the artist in residence began in 2007 and was normally funded through an award administered by the Trust Education Centre for the last few years. This experience has harnessed significant benefits, achievements, and enthusiasm, which supported the vision for the partnership. Art practice to be experienced comprises 80% available wall space within a specified area on the ground floor and 80% available wall space within a specified area on the lower ground floor. All artwork must be based on the expressive qualities of paint; should be representational pictures, for example, could be landscapes, portraits, still lifes; should be colorful; may be impressionistic; should instill a sense of comfort, hope, vitality, empathy, and well-being; will avoid anything violent, overly abstract, harsh, or clinical; are part of the artist's signature; will give an art experience yet be 'easy' and 'gentle' to appreciate; will feel inviting so that people might be inspired to want an art experience through the partnership; will complement rather than resemble or duplicate the many photos already on display at the Trust; and paint in oil on canvas, board, or linen to go in a frame [9, 10].

### **Case Studies and Best Practices**

In the following section, we present various case studies demonstrating successful applications of art in health communication. We present evidence of improvement through measurable outcomes and derive

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best practices that can be used to inform future initiatives. Initiatives outlined here demonstrate the successful application of a diverse range of art forms to enhance health communication. Each of these initiatives was established to address a specific issue of health communication. They show evidence of benefits for patients and positive experiences for healthcare providers. We encourage the healthcare sector to become more innovative in developing new and alternative modes of communication with their patients, which can improve health outcomes for all [11, 12]. After evaluating a mHealth program, the team at a hospital decided that the program's hospital-based live concerts would make an excellent addition to their Behavioral Health Aviary program. The program consists of once-a-month hour-long interactive, uplifting, and positive concerts for the patients and their caregivers. Reactions have been very positive. The concerts are designed to provide hope and healing for those who may be feeling anxious and depressed about their conditions, but the concerts also provide access to those who may be 'on the fence.' A children's hospital just sent out an update on one of the initial patients in their program. Five months ago, before the program began, the 15-year-old identified as 'connecting with adults' but is 'working on accepting help from adults' [13, 14].

### **Future Directions and Research Opportunities**

Given the potential for art to profoundly influence health communication, future research should pursue these avenues of exploration. Most importantly, there is a need for more controlled trials and additional empirical studies. Specifically, research is needed to assess which types of art interventions can effectively communicate care, compassion, respect, information, and other elements of the biopsychosocial model of health most central to patient satisfaction. This work should be done in partnership with artists to address questions such as how best to create art that is evocative and conveys caring for diverse populations, including underserved and non-English-speaking communities. Research in the development and preliminary testing phase may also be needed to successfully create art that is personalized and culturally responsive. In summary, these future studies should entail an interdisciplinary research team including a diverse range of artists who are able to connect with patients and future patient participants in a studio setting to create realistic artwork for testing. These studies will also need to provide an in-depth description of the artwork produced before testing, the implications of which may include a need for numerous peer-reviewed papers or other scholarly works due to the number of actors involved [15, 16]. Two areas ripe for exploration in the future are digital art and telerehabilitation applications, due to the emerging use of technology in healthcare, including telehealth. Moreover, establishing standard metrics for use would help facilitate comparisons across health communication modalities and between historically similar data sets. For example, future studies may ask participants to rate the artwork shown on these qualities in a validated way and include a statement to go along with the artwork to ensure that it is assessed for its recommended purpose. Future research may also examine how to add attachments to these metrics to test theoretical models of art in health communication and related brainstorm ways to clearly communicate the artistic elements and catalyst of these visual interventions to non-restoration healthcare providers for clinical trial records and future research utilizing art to measure intervention fidelity. It may more generally explore how best to communicate the presence and desired effect of the artwork to a traditionally artistically blind audience. Future research will encounter several challenges. First, this work may require a certain number of resources at the outset, primarily time for artists to create. In addition, despite the potential for art to change healthcare, it is likely to be hindered by a strong emphasis on work reduction. Advocacy will ultimately be required to push for larger investment in art. Overall, this study significantly moves the frame forward by providing guidelines for research on creating art to explore compassionate care. Additionally, it can inspire these future studies, which is a hallmark of qualitative research [17, 18].

### **CONCLUSION**

The integration of art into health communication represents a promising avenue for addressing challenges in patient-provider relationships. Art transcends language and cultural barriers, providing a universal medium for emotional expression and understanding. It enhances therapeutic interactions, reduces patient anxiety, and promotes empathy among healthcare providers. Successful case studies underscore the value of art in improving health outcomes, particularly for underserved populations. To maximize its impact, future research should explore personalized and culturally responsive art interventions, standardized evaluation metrics, and digital applications in telehealth. As the healthcare landscape evolves, embracing art as a communication tool offers innovative solutions for delivering compassionate and effective care.

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