



Getting arty is good for you

Push for holistic approach to health around WA

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Arts Editor



In Paraburdoo, miners are blowing up old trucks to make a public sculpture while breaking down the stigma around mental health.

On the edge of the Great Victoria Desert, Aboriginal people have combined ancient sand-art techniques with digital animation in a project to fight diabetes and renal disease.

At St John of God Hospital in Murdoch, patients can watch a pioneering in-house TV arts channel that applies the “feel-good” factor of the arts in aiding good health.

Laughter may be the best medicine, as the saying goes, but it seems getting stuck into art is just as good.

Music, writing, painting, dancing and performing are acting their part in the push for a holistic approach to health around the State.

The arts-is-good-for-you equation was confirmed by a recent University of WA study pointing to creative pursuits as the key to a new type of healing that would help ease pressure on our health system.

WA hospitals, which hold some of the State’s most impressive art collections, are embracing the power of art in the wards, corridors and even the operating theatres, where music often accompanies challenging surgical procedures.

Royal Perth Hospital has the

biggest hospital art collection in Australia, with about 1200 works by Arthur Boyd, Albert Namatjira, Rover Thomas, Robert Juniper, Arthur Streeton and other prominent artists. Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital has more than 700 works gracing its corridors.

St John of God Murdoch Hospital’s arts channel kicked off last month with the documentary series *Makers*, which profiles WA artists represented in its own large collection.

St John of God art curator Connie Petrillo says the channel builds on studies showing how art can de-stress patients by changing brain wave patterns, affecting the nervous system, hormonal balance and brain neurotransmitters.

“The designated arts channel has the added value of additional exposure to art for patients who may be immobile or required to rest,” Ms Petrillo says.

“Art gives patients a sense of wellbeing and comfort in their recovery. The simple act of having something to divert your attention from the health problem at hand and that can engage you in something beautiful or thought-provoking, can calm the mind. Patients often comment about the difference that this

makes in helping alleviate some of their anxiety as they are taken into surgery.”

Visitors to Fiona Stanley Hospital next door, which will open its doors on October 4, will be greeted in the main foyer by a striking sculpture by local artist Stuart Green that resembles a bench seat designed by Dali and crossbred with a giant Scalextrix track.

One of 11 public art commissions at Fiona Stanley totalling \$1.5 million under the Percent for Art Scheme, Green’s timber-and-steel *In Between* and *All Around* adds a sense of fun while acting as a navigational aid in the massive

facility.

“People are going to be walking around and at least when they see my piece, they will go, ‘Ah, I’ve been here before’,” Green says.

The bench seating stretches out and loops the loop, encouraging the eye to follow its curves through the air in what Green hopes will give viewers some brief distraction from any anxiety about their hospital stay.

“If you can have that kind of humanising, quirky, interesting effects on the patients, you relieve that stress and boredom, they may heal quicker and you may be able to get them out of the door faster,” he says. “If you get 5 per cent of the patients out of the door quicker, that is a huge cost benefit for the life of the hospital.”

Artworks at Fiona Stanley have been integrated into the design and construction, using colour and positioning to help people find their way at a stressful and uncomfortable time when they are more likely to become disoriented.

Through the main foyer window is the hospital’s central courtyard and play area, where Olga Cironis has installed several playful animal figures that appear to be made of stitched blankets and awaiting a cuddle from children.

But Cironis has cast them in bronze, usually used to immortalise statesman, to challenge ideas of what is important in life and so that each cuddle will polish them into a golden lustre.

Cironis also has worked with children at Princess Margaret Hospital, where her *Laughter Amongst Clouds* installation has been made with input from staff and patients in the eating disorders ward.

The WA Symphony Orchestra is applying music as medicine on its regular visits to PMH, where its

concerts in the Starlight Children’s Theatre are broadcast on the



in-house TV channel and the musicians tour the wards to meet and entertain bedridden children.

“Given some of the children come from remote parts of the State, the WASO performances are the first time some of our children have heard or seen orchestral instruments,” WASO community engagement manager Cassandra Lake says.

At the other end of the age spectrum, dementia afflicts almost 280,000 Australians and that number is expected to soar to almost one million by 2050.

Alzheimer’s Australia WA art therapist Jackie Lewis runs Artistic Adventures, a series of guided tours and hands-on studio sessions at the Art Gallery of WA for dementia sufferers and their partners. She also has set up art programs at aged-care homes.

“These stimulating art opportunities are allowing people to explore and be creative, often to learn new skills, in a non-judgmental environment where everyone can become an artist and reconnect with the world around them,” Ms Lewis says.

At a recent art-health conference in Perth, St John of God Health Care chief executive Michael Stanford called for a new mode of thinking about hospitals as community facilities using art to reach out beyond staff, patients and their families.

Hospitals are looking to make people feel better while artists,

performers and producers are looking for more venues to bring their creative vision to life, Dr Stanford says.

Lobbies, waiting rooms, hallways and other hospital spaces could be stages for dancers, actors and musicians, he says.

“How could we more imaginatively use hospital facilities as visual, literary and performing arts spaces? Can the Perth International Arts Festival and Fringe World come to one of our hospitals or another hospital in the city? What about the writers’ festival? What about the comedy festival, the WA Museum, the WA

Ballet, WA Opera, WAAPA, the WA Youth Orchestra, WA Youth Jazz Orchestra and Ochre Contemporary Dance?”

Integrating the arts into the hospital as a workplace also bolsters staff wellbeing, team spirit and job satisfaction, promoting better doctor-patient relationships and a better standard of care, Dr Stanford says.

“Our mission urges us to provide distinctive and holistic services that promote life to the full,” he says. “For us, arts and health go together as part of the holistic care experience.”

In the area of preventive health, education and mental health, the arts have been deployed through such successful enterprises as the Gift of Life play promoted by DonateLife and Community Arts Network WA’s Wheatbelt initiatives like Yarns of the Heart, Noongar Pop Culture and Healing Songs.

On the edge of the WA border, issues of mental health, nutrition and kidney health problems among indigenous people have been tackled by the Western Desert

Kidney Health Project and the Sand Tracks contemporary music touring scheme.

In the Pilbara, sculptor David Mickle has been working with fly-in, fly-out miners to use explosives to shape steel into a big public artwork at the Paraburdoo Men’s Shed.

Run by Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts WA and Rio Tinto, and backed by the Mental Health Commission, the unusual art project is one of five around the State aimed at FIFO workers, Aboriginals, farmers, young adults and other people vulnerable to the depressive effects of social isolation in the regions.

The year-long project in Paraburdoo has helped pull in drill and blast engineers, plant and maintenance, transport, health and safety workers who would normally not work together, Mickle says.

“In some ways the artwork is a byproduct,” he says. “This is essentially a complex team

building exercise aimed at offering engaging alternatives and activities to those that have no real access to them.

“It is about trying to build a space outside of work where it becomes possible to begin to address difficult issues, offering art as a form of dialogue to do that.”

The experimental and dangerous way of making the sculpture requires a team of highly specialised individuals to pull it off, he says.

“That we are doing this with a bunch of miners, using explosives to create art and attempting to affect social change at the same time is in itself a particularly unique challenge that we are meeting head-on.”

AGENDA



Digital delight: Organisers at the Western Desert Kidney Health Project.



Playful animals: Artist Olga Cironis with her sculptures at Fiona Stanley Hospital.



Project: David Mickle, left, with some of the crew at the Paraburdoo Men's Shed.



Weekend West, Perth

13 Sep 2014, by Stephen Bevis

General News, page 58 - 1,169.00 cm²

Capital City Daily - circulation 333,768 (-----S-)

ID 00312162749

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Year-long work: The concept and design for Paraburdoo's sculpture was revealed last week.



Mammoth work: Stuart Green with his sculpture In Between and All Around.