



## An Expressive Art Group for those Affected by Cancer at the FORCE Cancer Support Centre, Exeter

### Keywords:

Cancer, support, art, expressive art

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July 2007-December 2007

### Project team:

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### Summary of project

A support nurse worked alongside a professional artist to facilitate the provision of a group to enable people affected by cancer to express themselves through art making and creativity, and to evaluate its impact on participants' well-being.

The evaluation of the project's impact on individual well-being, self-esteem and sense of mutual support was underpinned by both a qualitative analysis of participants' journals, and through verbal feedback.

The evaluation showed very positive results; the art work was found to be absorbing, therapeutic and relaxing. As a result the FORCE Centre now incorporates an expressive art group into its range of services to users, alongside complementary therapies, information, counselling, relaxation and other site-based cancer support groups.

### Background

The FORCE Cancer Support Centre provides free support and advice to anyone affected by cancer, whether they are a patient, relative, carer or friend. An average of 250 people visit the Centre per week to partake of a range of support services, such as counselling, information and library facilities, complementary therapies, relaxation classes and support groups. The FORCE Cancer Charity funds all of these services.

The Centre is a purpose-built building, conveniently situated in the grounds of the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, and both the interior and exterior of the building are designed to create the best possible environment for its visitors.

At the time of writing this report, there has been no Cochrane Review focusing on the use of art therapy with adult cancer patients. A 2003 Cochrane Review entitled 'Interventions for Improving Communication with Children and Adolescents about their Cancer' included studies involving art therapy, but concluded that more research was needed in this area.

There is, however, an evidence-base for the efficacy of such an approach. For example, Nainis et al. (2006) conducted a

study involving adult cancer patients which determined that one-hour art-making sessions with a therapist yielded statistically significant decreases in a broad spectrum of symptoms including fatigue, pain, depression, anxiety, lack of appetite and breathlessness. There was also a reduction in tension, nervousness, worry and apprehension.

Symptom amelioration resulting from art work is similarly reflected in a growing body of literature (Lane and Graham-Pole, 1994; Luzzato and Gabriel, 2000; Ponto et al., 2003; Oster et al., 2006). In addition, Walsh et al. (2004, pp 219) showed that the benefits could be extended to caregivers. In their study of forty caregivers, they found that the participants noticeably 'changed their demeanour and attitudes as soon as they became involved in creative art activities'.

Such evidence builds on the work of Achterberg, Dossey and Kolkmeir (1994) who observed that the use of imagery is one of medicine's oldest and most powerful tools. Guided imagery has been found to have a beneficial effect on the body, mind and spirit when incorporated into the care of patients with cancer, auto-immune diseases, neurologically disabilities and chronic pain and may improve some patient outcomes.

The project described here also owes some of its genesis to the remarkable work of the late Michel Petrone, particularly his book of paintings entitled 'The Emotional Cancer Journey'.

### Aim of the project

In setting up the group the aim was to use creativity to:-

- help improve understanding of what is happening in peoples lives
- promote interaction
- foster mutual support
- introduce new dimensions to peoples lives
- improve confidence and coping mechanisms
- introduce new skills and ways of thinking

The project was evaluated to assess its therapeutic, supportive and positive impact through analysis of qualitative data.

### Setting up the art group

#### Facilitators

The project funding enabled the appointment of an artist, familiar with both the aims of the Centre and with the project, to co-facilitate the group alongside the Centre's Oncology Support Nurse. This was thought to be a combination that would promote the use of artistic skills and techniques but also acknowledge that creative activity has the potential to illicit challenging thoughts, and therefore the support nurse was available to recognise if or when group activity was adversely affecting a participant's emotional and psychological state and to offer support as appropriate.

# FORCES

## Recruiting participants

A flyer advertising the group was placed in prominent positions in the Centre, in the day-case chemotherapy unit, the in-patient oncology ward and the out-patient clinic area, with a contact number to ring if people were interested. The wording was as follows:-

### Want to be Creative?

*Would you like the chance to ponder, draft, doodle, sketch and create your own art in an informal and relaxing environment?*

*Would you like to try working with pencil, felt pen, oils, pastels, charcoal, crayons, chalks?*

In response to the flyer 25 people expressed an interest.

## Developing the programme

A fortnightly programme was drawn up to encompass a theme for each session, and enabling use of a broad range of materials, which were then purchased from art shops and from a local 'scrap store' providing scrap materials for educational purposes. Canvases and good quality art paper was also purchased.

The group would meet in a naturally-lit and spacious seminar room, and an appeal for suitable carpet protection was met by a local firm, Pack-exe. It was planned that the sessions should last two hours, with a break halfway through for refreshments.

Of the interested 25, 17 people were able to attend the first session. This included two couples i.e. a patient and a carer. Three of the participants were male and the remainder were female.

At the first session, the aims of the group were outlined and 'ground rules' were established concerning mutual support and respect and confidentiality.

## Evaluation

Of the seventeen participants, two left after attending the first session. One felt that the group was 'too light-hearted and not serious enough', the other felt the art work was 'too basic'. One member and one of the couples left due to ill-health after the second session.

At the first session, each group member was given a 'journal' in the form of a blank book in which they were invited to record their observations about their project, their thoughts about their work, and the impact, if any, on their psychological, physical and social state. Analysis of the content of the journals formed the main source of evaluation. The length of journals ranged from one page to fifty-four pages, with the average length being sixteen pages. Most of the group wrote their journal in the form of a diary, and perhaps the most accurately representative way to portray the impact of the project is to first present the following chronological excerpts from participants. Participants were asked if their journals could be used in providing material for the evaluative content of this report, and all gave their consent verbally.

### 13th September: Collage

*"The introduction was informative and short. Sarah's work showed us her love of colour. The session gave us freedom to explore our own ideas with a very good variety of materials. Everyone was involved in their own 'creation'. Sarah was generous with her encouragement and it was obvious that we*

*had all enjoyed the session. The variety of pinks, mauves and purples made me think of iris, sharp points and folded petals."*

*"I didn't want the session to end and found myself being quite reluctant to finish what I was doing and pack up. I enjoyed the tactile experiences-the feel of the different textured papers, and even the very sticky-gluey fingers. I had a sense of excited anticipation following Sarah's introduction, and wanted to get stuck in. I felt something inside me unlock, which I've been thinking about on and off since. Hard to put into words, but there was something associated with being creative that was both satisfying and liberating. I think I've been missing the creative elements of my job since finishing work."*

*"I really liked being part of the group-the banter, the jokes, the sense of sharing and the tacit sense of understanding between group members. It was also important that everyone in the room participated."*

*"Meeting the group was good. We have a common togetherness, by this I mean we all have cancer but equally we bring our unique individualism."*

*"I feel that space, shape and colour all hold equal importance. For without one of the elements there would be no whole. This also reflects how I feel about managing my cancer. In fact the whole session relates to my cancer experience. The tissue paper not ripping properly is when cancer hits. I felt frustrated, angry and powerless to do anything about, but just went with it. My second picture shows that all the elements of battling cancer hold their own importance. I believe that the holistic approach of mind, body and spirit have helped me and continue to do so. Without one of these elements it would be a struggle to become whole again."*

*"After a year of facing unpleasant facts (and treatment!) the idea of some encouragement really appealed. I did some art at school and as part of my teacher-training, but it's not something I've ever explored for myself and I've always wanted to."*

*"When you're not 'into' art, you don't really know where to start. Classes seem too formal at the moment and I wouldn't know which to choose anyway. Local artists show amazing work and I'd feel too intimidated to even put my head round the door at one of their meetings. So the idea of a course, using a variety of techniques and I hoped with other novices too, really excited me."*

*"From the minute we arrived we were made welcome and put at ease. Obviously tremendous thought has gone into setting up of the group-so many materials, a lovely light airy venue. My afternoon was magic and I've come home on a high. My brain has been immersed in colour, shape and texture and a lively and witty banter with new colleagues. What a wonderful escape from treatments, appointments, chemo sessions and all the other straight jackets imposed on cancer patients."*

### 27th September: Texture

*"Sarah showed us examples of her work where she had used different paints, pastels, glitter etc. on a simple wash background. I had not used acrylics before and enjoyed mixing oil pastels and paint. Enjoyed the freedom."*

*"I painted background and then explored using acrylics and pastels. Very satisfying-did four pictures in two hours. Sarah offered real encouragement-"reminded me of Kandinsky", Sarah said. I'm obviously an artist in the making!"*

*"Very engrossing afternoon. Cancer? What cancer?!"*

# FORCES

"The process of expressive art is certainly as important-or maybe more important-than the outcome for me. This is very different from the expectations and outcome-driven ethos of my career in recent years."

"Cancer can be very limiting, and it places constraints on me that I hate and resent. Expressive art is helping me to break through those constraints, and part of me is also breaking free."

"I also discovered a freedom of movement as I was swirling and sweeping, and moving the paint/pastels etc. in all directions over the paper. I discovered a confidence with the materials that was wonderful and unexpected. Cancer can shatter your confidence, so to unexpectedly find some, or find it in an unexpected place is joyous."

"This session frustrated me and I was not happy with any of my finished art work. I found it hard going and could not find a medium that I felt happy with. I had just been told before the session that my cancer had not been seen in its form anywhere in the world, which had blown me away and I wonder if this had any bearing on the session."

## 4th October: Tone

"I really enjoyed this session. I found that having the patterns already drawn on the card took away the having to think about what to do. This is a good thing if you are suffering from chemo 'mush' or are using the session for time out"

"Really enjoyed today's dabble with colour. I liked the confines of the circles and the gouache. The group is slowly melding together and talking about cancer and 'pulling legs', but still quietly involved in what we are doing."

"At the moment, I'm having to revisit all the stuff about having cancer, as I'm applying for medical retirement, so the numerous forms to fill out bring it all back home. The art has given me another resource to deal with this. I was pretty well-adjusted to my life as it is now, but the group is very timely and it's certainly proving to be therapeutic and supportive and enabling. I'm very well aware of the things that I've lost as a consequence of cancer, but the expressive art is one of the many things I've gained as a consequence and I shall seek opportunities to continue with art once the group has finished."

"On the bus home, I found myself looking at the tones and colours of everything. Not just the obviously attractive such as autumn leaves, but the bricks in a wall, pavement slabs and the ways in which sunshine and shadows alter the tone and colour and objects. In the days since I've noticed that I am seeing things with a different perspective."

## 18th October: Abstract painting

"Arriving to find a 'proper' framed canvas on the table was really exciting. It felt as though someone had faith that a finished result could be achieved."

"The colour and shape I've come to enjoy so much can be used without me having to create a realistic image of something."

"I began by thinking about the feelings that I had during my cancer. I explored in my mind what shapes the feelings were and what colours they were. I was absorbed and fascinated by the decisions I was making. How the feeling of alone had to be in the bottom right hand corner and a small yellow circle. There was a cave in the top left hand corner with blue footprints to show the times that I was sad and wanted to go and hide somewhere alone. In the centre of the picture is the red spikiness of anger, underneath are the blue tears. . . . . At the bottom are lines of gold to represent all the people I meet while I was fighting my cancer

and below that is a purple line which shows that I had a belief that what ever happened in the end I would be OK."

"Abstract art today. Broke up the canvas with tape and then used colour to fill the spaces. Again I enjoyed the use of colour and putting on the paint."

## 1st November: Postcard design

"This session really surprised me as I have not been keen on such a small scale, but I did enjoy it."

"The group appears to me to have developed an unspoken respect for each other. We have all come with the common element of a relationship with cancer, but the focus is the art. This is all done in a space where there are not judgements made about art or cancer."

"I do see things differently now, noticing colours and tones in a way I've never experienced before. An image I noticed in Scotland -silver birches, bronze- coloured bracken and hanging green moss- provided the 'inspiration' for my work this afternoon."

"The expressive art hits so many buttons for me. It's cathartic, absorbing, liberating, disciplined, quirky, adventurous, fun ,fun. fun! The process is more important than the outcome, but increasingly I'm finding that what I'm producing is giving me a sense of achievement and pride, and now I'd like to develop some art skills and really release my imagination."

"Again, so much to thank everyone for. It was great at the end of the session to look at all the work. As always, a similar input for us all, but such different outcomes."

## 15th November: Mood and atmosphere

"There is still a great camaraderie and bond demonstrated by the odd comments from each person. We don't talk about cancer, but it's there and we each have an understanding of others' positions and where our motivations come for certain actions. It's good to know we're not alone on our isolating and isolated journeys but good too not have 'Cancer' as the focus of our meeting."

"It's been a difficult week trying to sustain our relationship through the burden and responsibilities of the chemo treatment but we come to the group and with the freedom to swirl paint (and make mistakes!) we are enriched and strengthened."

"I have noticed that I have become bolder in my experimentation, and have been able to create an 'atmosphere' through paint that others have recognised and identified with."

## 29th November: Seascapes

"I had been so eager to attend this week to explore my favourite blues and greens, to try and achieve in paint the colours that had been in my head, and it was pleasing to do it."

"It's hard to put into words, but I always feel like something has unlocked, or 'clicked' with me when I experience art. Whatever emotions or feelings I bring with me to the session, change. A good mood is usually enhanced more; sometimes anger or disappointment has been assuaged. The minimum 'return' has been the suspension of the real world and in its place I can go to a different world with art, I don't have to find words to express myself, I can just do and be."

"I've started to 'dabble' at home but it's not quite the same as being in company. I've really enjoyed the group and like the people. I enjoy seeing what they've created and love the interaction. You can be solitary and a member of a group at the same time. It's a supportive and safe environment, and doesn't

# FORCE

get competitive-which is great."

"I like the way Sarah and Robert interact with us all-participating, gently leading, giving us ideas, enabling, encouraging, holding the group gently yet paying attention to individual needs."

## 6th December: Circles and geometrics

"This group has had a really powerful effect on me-shame I had to have cancer to discover the joys and delights of art!"

"I just love this group....It's to do with being asked to express yourself and relieve feelings without necessarily knowing in words what it is you're expressing!"

"My painting has changed over the weeks according to my wife, I've gone from very dark colours to brighter ones, she says I'm happier and the pictures mean I'm more relaxed."

"In relation to my cancer, participating in art is not going to cure me, but it's fun, it's given me a new interest and purpose. It's given a new dimension and quality to my life."

## Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis of the evaluation data suggests that participants' experiences of the group can be summarised under four main themes and associated sub-themes.

### The process of being creative

- By experiencing the different processes and materials, the participants experienced:
- a sense of freedom to explore which they found both satisfying and liberating
- an opportunity to focus on the art processes rather than the outcomes which was valued
- a variety of feelings which may differ from those that they have been associating with their cancer and treatments, for example, a sense of magic, being engrossed, belief, enjoyment and excitement
- freedom in a way that enabled them 'to explore' and 'to be'

### The development of a 'group dynamic'

The data suggests that participants had a strong sense of being part of the group, but also of being allowed to be an individual within the group. There was a sense of shared understanding between group members which was felt to be supportive and enabling, creating a sense of 'not being alone'.

### Relating the art work to cancer and its treatment

For some participants, there were clear links between their experiences in the art sessions and their cancer and treatments. For example, some were able to see similarities in feelings such as frustration with a session and/or materials and frustration with cancer. During the different sessions, others were able to acknowledge aspects of their lives that had been lost through their cancer experience e.g. loss of creative aspects of work, confidence, constraints and limitations, as the expressive art enabled them to experience some freedom from these restraints and also to enjoy a sense of pride and achievement and to regain lost confidence.

### The awareness of personal development

Some participants became aware of personal change as a consequence of their involvement in the art group. This included the discovery of an interest in art and a desire to continue with this once the group had finished. The partner of another participant noticed a change in both the mood of the art work and of the artist.

## Conclusion

Art and art-making have not traditionally been an arena in which nurses have operated, but, apart from two exceptions, the positive and therapeutic outcomes reported by cancer patients and carers involved in this project indicate that partnership with practitioners in this field is worthy of investigation in order to facilitate amelioration from the effects of treatment or of ill-health, and in order to foster self-confidence, self-esteem and an energising process.

The journal writing that accompanied the art-making during this project highlights the value of the personal narrative at the centre of the patient experience, from which nurses can gain a shared understanding, resulting from the emphasis on authenticity, uniqueness and contextual relevance.

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