

Art, Healing and Heart Disease: A Campaign to Explore the Relationships, Evaluate Possibilities, and Create Meaningful Change

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Overview:

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the developed world. Changes in lifestyles and related risk factors in developing countries, as well as steady progress in combating infectious diseases are quickly making cardiovascular disease the most prevalent illness burden world-wide.

While enormous progress has been made in medical, surgical and primary risk factor reduction approaches to curbing heart disease, it is clear that a growing understanding of the intricate relationship between these disorders and the human experiences of emotions, stress, attitudes and beliefs represent an opportunity to reduce cardiovascular disease and the suffering it causes even further. It is well known, for example, that certain emotional states are predictive of mortality and morbidity in patients with heart disease¹⁻³. Since much can be done to prevent psychological distress, it is reasonable to imagine that doing so would significantly alleviate heart disease and its consequences.

Fortunately, while our mastery of the traditional medical aspects of heart disease is growing, so is our appreciation of the “health enhancing” aspects of a range of important human activities, including engagement with artistic and creative processes. The rigorous evaluation of the relationship between creative engagement, either in the making of art or the appreciation of it, is still in early stages. However, we do know that creative modalities such as music therapy and relaxation techniques reduce stress and anxiety in cardiac patients⁴⁻⁶ and there is additional thought-provoking research as well.

- In a meta-analysis of 27 studies, patients with ischemic heart disease who were taught relaxation therapy found that this form of treatment reduces resting heart rate, the incidence of angina, arrhythmias, cardiac events and cardiac death. Patients who were taught relaxation therapy after having sustained a myocardial infarction were shown to experience fewer cardiac events in a five-year period than patients who were not taught this technique⁷⁻⁸.

- Music therapy, massage, guided imagery, therapeutic touch, and stress management instructions have been used successfully to decrease patient anxiety prior to diagnostic cardiac catheterization, providing better patient outcomes⁹⁻¹⁰.
- A clear connection exists between mental health and heart disease, which requires assessment, collaboration with other professionals, and behavioral health interventions. Psychosocial factors such as stress, anger, anxiety, and depression promote heart disease. Alternately, the use of mood-enhancing or stress-reducing techniques--such as optimism, meditation, counseling, exercise, and imagery--as well as a lifestyle behavioral change approach can have a positive effect on reducing the incidence of heart disease¹¹.

As more research becomes available on the beneficial effects of artistic and creative engagement on alleviating cardio-toxic emotions and stress, hope grows that there is a tie to cardiovascular disease prevention. And there is no reason to delay. It's likely that we can already build upon existing knowledge to provide opportunities for healing in people with heart disease and its related risk factors.

Although the questions related to art and healing are much broader than heart disease alone, we feel that the focus on heart disease is justified for several reasons.

- ***Heart disease is highly prevalent and deadly.*** Many people are seriously affected by heart disease and, consequently, any useful mediating interventions or approaches will generate significant individual and social benefit very quickly.
- ***Women are at particular risk, and this approach can help.*** It is becoming clear that cardiovascular disease in women is more significant than previously believed and is a leading cause of death and disability. Paradoxically, it is also often under appreciated and under treated. Knowing that women are more likely than men to respond to non-traditional medical interventions makes this approach both important and timely.
- ***Existing scientific studies suggest that this is worth pursuing.*** Growing acceptance in the bio-medical world of the important relationship between some of the determinants of heart disease (such as emotions, attitudes, and beliefs) has created both a scientific basis and receptivity for integrated approaches to care.
- ***There is an opportunity for therapeutic complementarity and integration.*** The improved outcomes that can be achieved by introducing artistic and creative engagement as a form of self-care can be integrated with more traditional bio-medical interventions, rather than be seen as replacements or alternatives to them.
- ***Potential benefits and impact are amenable to rigorous study.*** Well-developed physiologic research methods (including the measurement of heart rhythm variability, blood tests for markers of heart disease and related processes), as well

as socio-biologic assessments (such as surveys and interactive journals) are readily available to quickly create new and important knowledge.

What We Are Proposing: The “Arts and the Heart” Campaign

In recognition of these scientific, cultural and environmental drivers, we believe a focused and sustained initiative to research and implement the practice of creative expression (art) and cardiovascular disease (heart) is well warranted.

The “Arts and the Heart” Campaign, orchestrated and led by the Foundation for Art and Healing, is a multi-year initiative whose goal is to better understand the potential benefits of artistic and creative engagement in reducing heart disease and, importantly, to make those benefits available to individuals and communities.

The Campaign has three major components: 1) a world-class roundtable event to lay the groundwork for the advancement of Arts and the Heart; 2) a high-impact community outreach program; and (3) a groundbreaking research program. Each component of the Campaign is designed to interconnect with the others.

1. Achieving Visibility and Focus: The “Arts and the Heart” Roundtable

The Campaign kicked into “high gear” with an “Arts and the Heart” roundtable held in New York City in June 2009. The roundtable met the need to get a 360° orientation to the art, healing and heart disease dialogue in order to best grasp its fullest potential. Attendance was by select invitation and included well-known leaders in medicine, the arts, public health and community health programming, and outreach. Participants reviewed and discussed summaries of evidence for the use of creative expression to improve cardiovascular disease, identified gaps that can be addressed by future research, and brainstormed what can be done to translate the work to our communities of practice.

The goals of this kick-off to our exploratory roundtable were five fold.

- Review and consider what is already known about the **relationship** between art and healing and heart disease, and speculate as to validity, mechanisms, explanatory hypotheses, and other aspects of the relationship.
- Discuss and intend to clarify and quantify the **potential importance** of further exploring this relationship, in terms of accruing individual and community benefit.
- Identify specific **gaps in current knowledge** to gain a more complete understanding of art, healing and heart disease.

- Intend to achieve some consensus as to a range of prioritized activities including research, demonstration projects, additional convenings/discussions that could be initiated to **accrue new knowledge and insights**.
- Discuss **potential community directed outreach activities** that can be identified to deliver helpful insights and programs immediately.

Fundamental to creating innovative changes in concepts and practice was (and will continue to be) the need to cast a wide net in soliciting sustained and varied input reflecting the complexity of both the opportunity and its attendant challenges. The Foundation for Art and Healing recruited participation of experienced practitioners of medicine, the arts, community outreach programming, communications and research, as well as engaging with patients and their advocates.

The roundtable provided a spirited opportunity for the development of additional important issues, such as how to create more awareness of the art and healing relationship in individuals and communities suffering from health disparities, how to create a sustained and effective dialogue among stakeholders that endures and grows over time, and how to pave the way for additional research, knowledge creation and outreach. An archival video tape of the event was created to share the proceedings with others interested in the Campaign's mission and strategies.

Following the roundtable, two specific working groups were formed. One is a group that to guide the development of the Community Outreach program strategy, and the other a group whose charter is to guide the Research Program.

2. Sustained Societal Engagement: The Community Outreach Program

The Community Outreach Advisory Group will advise the Foundation on both effective grant-making in community outreach, as well as the development of strategies and tools that can be made available directly to groups within the community.

Community outreach, and specifically the development of sustained community-based programming within community organizations, is already a core activity of the Foundation for Art and Healing. Building on this competency, the Foundation will seek opportunities to encourage the development and evaluation of "Arts and the Heart" programs at community centers, schools, museums, and similarly situated institutions. The ability to conduct periodic convenings with invited participants and leaders in the fields of community health to maintain a continued dialogue on this topic will be a high priority.

3. *Commitment to Knowledge and Evaluation: The Research Program*

The Research Program Advisory Group's charter will be to help the Foundation and the Campaign identify and prioritize gaps in our current knowledge related to art and the heart that can be addressed through sponsored research initiatives.

The research opportunities that will be considered within the scope of the Campaign are quite broad. They include initiatives that explore the physiologic impact of artistic engagement using a range of research modalities and methods, including Functional Brain Imaging (fMRI), cardiac rhythm monitoring, and metabolic evaluation of cardiac functioning. Additionally, behavioral and social science research methodologies could yield powerful new insights into what works (and what doesn't) in approaching heart disease with arts based interventions.

Submission of research, publication in peer-reviewed publications, and presentations will be encouraged, also to be sponsored by the Foundation.

Why is NOW the time for this initiative?

The burden of heart disease on individuals and our communities is well known. Importantly, receptivity for new perspectives on how to address this crisis (including the ability for meditation, guided imagery, yoga and other voluntary personal activities) to lead to states of mind and body that can have a positive impact on heart disease is increasingly understood and accepted. We are confident that provocative early research indicates that an important and vital relationship between heart disease and artistic engagement exists. Given the prevalence of cardiovascular disease and the urgency for addressing this situation, we believe it is particularly timely to assess what is already known, what would be useful to know, and what approaches might be undertaken to generate new knowledge and effective interventions.

Despite the fact that our current understanding is in its infancy, the sheer numbers of people who could benefit from our work and the sound base of research in related areas is compelling. Because so many people have an interest in and access to artistic engagement and so much is potentially to be gained, we think this is a humanistic and public health opportunity that merits serious and sustained commitment; hence, the Arts and the Heart Campaign!

Current Activities:

The Arts and the Heart Campaign had its official launch in June 2009 in New York City with our Roundtable event that included well-known leaders in the arts, medical, public health, research and community outreach having declared their interest and pledged support. A summary of published research that ties active engagement with art and art-making to the healing process in general and to heart disease in particular is nearing completion. Efforts to obtain earmarked funding from individuals, foundations and corporations have been well received and are ongoing.

The potential value and impact of this Campaign is already based on the good thinking, hard work and deep support of a diverse group of individuals and organizations. If this project resonates with you in any way and you have thoughts, questions or suggestions to share, or simply want to be kept informed of our progress, please don't hesitate to contact me directly.

I look forward to your thoughts and feedback and wish you the best in art, in life, and in healing!

Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH
Founder and President
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About the Author:

Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH Through his faculty appointment at the Harvard School of Public Health and through his private consulting practice, Dr. Nobel's teaching, research, and advisory activities address the design of healthcare delivery systems that improve quality, cost-effectiveness and access. A published poet, Dr. Nobel has received several awards for his poetry including the Bain-Swiggett Prize from Princeton University, and the American Academy of Poets Prize from the University of Pennsylvania. An avid arts supporter, he has served on the board of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company of New York City, the Board of Overseers of the De Cordova Art Museum in Lincoln, MA, and is a member of the Institute for Contemporary Art/Boston Director's Circle.