



Taking dance onto hospital wards

Lead dance artist for Air Arts: Engage, **Andrea Haley**, focuses on her experience of finding the space to deliver dance and connect patients, visitors and staff on hospital wards

A busy hospital ward, with its regimented routines – medication rounds, washing and bathing, doctors’ ward rounds, mealtimes and visiting times – is possibly one of the most unlikely places in which to find dance. It feels as if there is no space left amongst the hustle and bustle for anything remotely creative to exist; and yet there it is. On the older adult rehabilitation wards at London Road Community Hospital in Derby, dance and movement sessions are tentatively beginning to become part of the weekly routine.

Air Arts: Engage is a team of artists whose role is to deliver participatory arts projects on the wards of Derby

Hospitals. The focus of the project is to support the health and wellbeing of patients and to promote positive relationships between patients and staff. As lead dance artist on the team, I am now in the second year of delivering dance and movement sessions across four older adult rehabilitation wards. I work closely with the nursing team to lay down aims and objectives for the project, on a weekly basis, to identify which patients may benefit from or enjoy taking part in a movement session. Each dance and movement project has lasted several months, my last dance project used personal memories of dancing.



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As a community dance artist, I have delivered dance in many settings, however, I had never delivered dance within a hospital environment. In a previous life, I had been a mental health nurse and so had some familiarity with the ward structure and it wasn't a completely alien landscape. Delivering dance within a hospital environment requires a very different way of being and working. Individual bedside engagement is distinctly different from group movement sessions. For a group session, people know what they are turning up for, there is a distinct start and finish time and often participants are brought to the session. Beginning dance with someone in a hospital bed requires sensitivity, compassion, keen observation skills, knowing when to stop and a willingness to open doors into your own vulnerability as an artist. As a dance artist, I need to practise the art of mindfulness; to be in the present moment. Being in the present moment allows me to connect with others with authenticity through the movement: if I am asking others to be in the moment with the movement, then I need to meet them in that place. One of the biggest differences in delivering dance in hospitals is that people are having dance visited upon them.

It felt very daunting indeed on that first day two years ago, turning up with my bag of movement props and stereo. I remember thinking, “How can dance possibly fit within these walls?” There was no one to meet me, no care home residents with prior knowledge of the session or waiting for the session to begin. Approaching someone in a hospital bed can be uncomfortable and initiating conversation can feel awkward. I was so used to working within a structured group session plan I felt out of my comfort zone. I discovered that working with people individually in hospital beds and

ward bay areas required a different way of working; another pathway to connecting with others through dance.

Where and how do I begin?

At the time, I was lucky enough to have Diane Amans, a leading practitioner in community dance, as my supervisor on another project I was working on. Diane introduced me to the concept of leading dance non-verbally. Although I had been dipping my toe into this way of working, it was through the mentoring and conversations I had with Diane that I really started to develop this side of my practice. The non-verbal approach facilitates being in the moment, both for participant and artist; it provides a meeting place within the movement.

Using the non-verbal approach, I would pick a ward bay and enter, put the music on and begin some movement with a giant balloon, ribbon sticks or feathers. These props lent themselves well to this environment; they were able to travel across the space from one patient to the other, connecting everyone. The balloon often provided people with their biggest stretch of the day! Often the bedside session would organically develop into a semi-structured group session, which would sometimes include visitors and relatives and take on a ‘party atmosphere’. At other times, nothing I tried worked. Knowing when to stop and leave the space has been a particular consideration. There is a world of difference between someone who is very slowly showing signs of engagement to someone who is clearly not wanting or going to participate. If I have to pack up and leave then that is just how it is and I pick another bay area and try again.

Another learning experience for me as a dance practitioner has been working with different participants every week. In a lot of previous

project work there would always be some of the same people within each session, therefore progression was always a feature of the project itself. Within the hospital, it is a new group of participants every week, the focus being on participation and the promotion of positive relationships rather than progression or continuation. Patients will come to a group session and often they haven't spoken to one another before, even though their beds have been next to each other. During a dance session people will start to chat and laugh, to dance together. After the session, instead of going back to separate bed areas to have lunch, people often decide to have lunch together in the dining area, continuing to build friendships. I am delighted to know that dance has been the catalyst for these connections.

The group sessions across all four wards have been very positive and I have experienced levels of engagement I didn't envisage.

This year, I am delivering a second seven-month dance project across the older adult wards. I am slowly starting to feel that there is a place for me and dance on these wards. I know dance makes a difference and has a positive impact on the lives of people in hospital. I have witnessed tired, frail, anxious people come to life within a session, becoming energised, full of expression, smiling and laughing. The dance sessions create a space for people to remember who they are; a way of experiencing the body not just as a set of symptoms. Dance can help shift us from being a passive patient towards actively engaging in our own health and wellbeing.

Info

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