

THE idea came from a patient. At the beginning of a consultation she nervously recited a poem, by Lynn New, found on a fridge magnet. She told me she had practised it on the bus on the way to the surgery, and again when she was sitting in the waiting room.

*'I'm having a nervous breakdown
I can feel it coming on
I can't see reason any more
And my hope is all gone ...
Some say I'm neurotic
But that is not the case.
I don't need a psychiatrist...
I just need my own space.'*

Although the poem may not have great literary value, it seemed to be something in her confused and chaotic life that made sense. She wasn't having a nervous breakdown, it was a little more space that she needed and even if, with five young children, she couldn't have it, somehow she could have the poem and that was a start.

Creative writing has been used in various health settings, particularly in terminal care, psychiatry, primary care, and rehabilitation.¹⁻⁴ However, we know of only one other project involving a poet in residence in a GP surgery.⁵ There is some evidence to suggest that writing poetry may be effective in reducing stress and promoting wellbeing.⁶⁻⁸

We devised a project that was funded by Gloucestershire Adult Continuing Education and Training. Patients and staff were invited to attend creative writing sessions in the surgery with EW, individually or in groups. Some were referred by health staff, others self-referred. There was also a weekly group workshop for staff only which ran for 10 weeks. Printed poems and poem leaflets were available in the waiting room for patients to take away (Poems in the Waiting Room, Lee M [ed], 1998), and a collection of framed poems⁹ displayed throughout the surgery building. To complete the project we have had printed a collection of 50 poems written by staff and patients.¹⁰

Initially, the project was viewed with suspicion. It was felt by some not to be proper medicine, a waste of time and

money, transient, trendy. Slowly, though, poetry began to surround and inform us. Those who attended surprised themselves with what they wrote. The weekly staff workshops were well attended and invigorating.

Having a poet in the practice changed a few people's lives. We are used to drugs and therapies that help a large number of people in a small way. It is difficult to be sure what, exactly, benefit means. An improvement in their writing skills perhaps, or a clearer understanding of themselves, or just becoming a little happier and gaining some self-esteem. All important things seem so difficult to measure.

All participants completed a questionnaire. Including staff, 21 women and 4 men attended between one and eight writing sessions, each lasting about an hour. Participants' ages ranged from 25–75 years. Nine had never written poetry before; only four had done so recently. Some were suffering from depression or adjusting to life changes, some had chronic health problems, others were just interested and keen to try a different creative activity. However, many participants commented on the stress-relieving benefits of taking part: 'I was astonished at the volume and depth of emotion that came out in words', 'felt very relaxed after the session; it was a great stress reliever', 'a great way of sharing within the group'. Several perceived the writing process as therapeutic in some way: 'It's like taking the lid off!' 'It unlocked something I didn't know was there'.

One patient, particularly, seemed to benefit a great deal. She is 33 years old, had a serious head injury as a child and has multiple problems. She attends frequently with numerous medically unexplained symptoms. During the poetry project her consultation rate dropped dramatically, and she began to shape her feelings and experience into poems:

*Jigsaws
Jigsaws are
Interesting to do but
Generally one piece lost under
Something
And never made
Whole.¹⁰*

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Poetry therapy: theory and practice

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Doorways — Poems from May Lane Surgery

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Lost

My ambition to be a nurse

My confidence

Front door key

ME

My taste and smell

Without my Dad

Friends

*To be able to read a book all the way
through*

Shopping in a big store

My purse

My favourite film (Mike had taped me)

My jewellery

My way

My best pen.¹⁰

S Hayward

I, in turn, had to re-examine my view of her. Through many years of seeing her, I had lost sight of her own unique humanity and had become incapable of giving her the respect that I owed her.

We have to start promoting non-medical therapies for non-medical problems. Every time we prescribe, when there is no true medical problem, we are conspiring to medicalise. Poetry does not cure disease. Neither does diazepam bring back the lover who has left, the mother who has died. Poetry is about something that you didn't quite know was there. It is the process of writing that can surprise you and be uplifting. It makes you feel better.

The poetry project lasted 3 months. My patient has now been befriended by other participants of our poetry sessions. They phone her up, drive to her village to collect her and together they go to writing workshops. This may not seem like much, but for her it is incredible. She comes to see me sometimes and I am determined not to medicalise her life. Often we talk about writing and poetry. But sometimes it is just so tempting to bang out a prescription for her complaints and move onto the next patient.

Perhaps next time, instead of the antibiotics, or the Patient Information leaflets, I should just choose an appropriate poem and print that out on an FP10.

It might do less harm, and who knows ...

Simon Opher
Emily Wills

Consent

Full consent for the use of all material in this article was gained from the patient prior to publication.

EXPRESSIVE, explorative writing is a powerful way of dealing with pain, anxiety, bereavement, and chronic, terminal or acute illness. When we enter such states we have crossed a boundary away from a healthy, secure, confident life; we need something to hang onto, something as a guide. It is also a way of expressing deep joy, and of reconnecting oneself with younger selves, as in happy childhood memories. Writing can be a lodestone: pointing us to the true north. Many of the issues to be faced are known; but often the most troubling, or unstable-making are unknown. Writing is a quick, straightforward way to get in touch with such areas.

Poetry writing is particularly good, like Spike Milligan's *String*: 'Rope is thicker/ but string/ is quicker.' Poetry is short, to the point and is capable of capturing, seemingly from nowhere, issues which we most need to think about. Why else do so many people only write poetry at a time of birth, bereavement or passionate intense love? Patients can be encouraged to write helpfully and joyously at other times also.

Nick Mazza's *Poetry Therapy* is a handbook for anyone involved in therapeutic relationships, or just interested in doing it. The focus in poetry therapy is upon the

person and not the poem; writers are not expected to write finished pieces such as one might read in a book. It's the process which matters, not the product. Although the product often brings a sense of achievement and self-worth, and can be appreciated by others.

The theoretical background is of interest to those involved in counselling. There are, usefully, some very straightforward ideas for using writing with patients, particularly in the family therapy chapter, such as creating a list beginning with: 'I am afraid of ...' 'I feel loved when ...'. Lists, in my experience, are wonderful things — they can lead to so much, and yet anyone can write a list. There are also valuable suggestions for patients reading published poems, such as, *To everything there is a season* from Ecclesiastes.

Poems from May Lane Surgery is a delightful collection created by poet, patients and staff. They range from *I remember* by K Curtis-Hayward, to *Jigsaws* by S Hayward. Every GP surgery needs a poet, or at least the encouragement to write. How about practice poets, as well as practice nurses?

Gillie Bolton

Poems in the Waiting Room

Arts Council England has awarded a Lottery funded grant to expand *Poems in the Waiting Room*. The service, which has been running since 1998, supplies free poetry pamphlets in health service waiting rooms for patients to keep. It is highly popular with patients. One wrote: '*What a really lovely idea! Thank you very much for lighting up our doctor's surgery waiting room. The day's weather was awful! The atmosphere in the waiting room none too healthy. But your poems are all wonderful — and meaningful. Well done and thanks.*'

At first, distribution was confined to South West London but soon spread, with practices recruited mainly by word of mouth. Expansion became demand-led, straining the original sponsor The Beatrice Trust's budget.

The Arts Council grant now opens the chance for all primary care practices to benefit from the service. *Poems in the Waiting Room* has circulated NHS Primary Care Trusts as a means to inform each general practice of this opportunity.

The scheme is a registered charity (1099033), and no charge whatsoever is made for the poetry pamphlets. The sole obligation is to put them on display.

For samples of the poetry pamphlets and further information contact:

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