



## The Culture, Health and Wellbeing International Conference (CHW21)

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The third Culture, Health and Wellbeing International Conference was delivered online on 21–23 June 2021 by Arts & Health South West (UK), with over 500 speakers and delegates from 30 countries. The conference themes were Inequality, Power and Sustainability. There were 116 keynotes, oral sessions, workshops, panels and performances over the three days and delegates were also able to watch recorded versions of sessions via a YouTube link. Following a peer-review process, 49 research papers were accepted by the conference committee and edited by Professor Norma Daykin for the published research proceedings (Daykin & Coulter, 2021). The research includes analyses of data from large surveys, theoretical contributions, methodology papers, literature reviews, quantitative studies, qualitative research and process evaluations.

Previous conferences, in 2013 and 2017, had been face-to-face in Bristol in the UK. Although the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the decision to go digital, the online format, stretching over 12 hours per day, enabled us to hear voices from remote parts of the world, ranging from people working in government to those from marginalised communities. The presentation recordings will be made public in November this year (Arts & Health South West, 2021a).

The first day's focus on inequality featured the Hon. Carmel Sepuloni MP, New Zealand government minister, who highlighted the important contribution arts and culture can make to wellbeing, which is at the heart of policy making in New Zealand. Other New Zealand presentations included work drawing on indigenous Māori and Pacific Island worldviews and creative practices. In her speech, *Culture is no Excuse for Inequality*, Pascale Allotey, Director of the United Nations University International Institute for Global Health, reflected on how culture can perpetuate and reinforce inequalities and power structures, but the power of the imagination and stories can help us navigate complexity. The theme of inequality included a focus on disability with the premiere of *Cap O'Rushes* (Arts & Health South West, 2021b), a newly commissioned work by composer Cevanne Horrocks-Hopayian, who worked remotely with an inclusive Portuguese ensemble featuring young people with learning difficulties, a disabled-led chamber group, an ensemble using technology-

assisted instruments, and the dance and film duo UNIT from the UK. In another session, New York theatre director Ping Chong spoke about the series *Undesirable Elements* that included a performance developed with Professor Hiromi Sakamoto, *Difficult Lives*, which brings to life the voices of those marginalised by disability in Japan.

Day two focused on the theme of power. Vic McEwan, artist-in-residence at the Sydney Facial Nerve Clinic, described developing patients' creative practice alongside clinical care, equalising power relationships and empowering the patients. Lord Howarth of Newport, UK, reflected on policy-level developments in the UK since the publication of the *Creative Health* report (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017) and the establishment of the National Centre for Creative Health (<https://ncch.org.uk/>). Jenny Elliot, Chief Executive of Arts Care in Northern Ireland, described 30 years of arts and health sustainable partnerships that emerged during the power vacuum created by the Troubles in the 1980s. A panel chaired by Nils Fietje from the WHO/Europe office reflected on the latest European policy developments since the WHO published *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review* (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). A conversation between two palliative care doctors and authors, Dr Rachel Clarke (UK) and Dr Sunita Puri (USA), on the *Power of the Imagination – Death and Dying*, was followed by an opportunity for delegates to join 'Listening Circles' to explore their feelings and thoughts on the subject.

The third day began with a very moving live performance from Tokyo. Sokerissa, led by choreographer Yuuki Aoki, is a dance group of participants who have experience of living on the street in search of "a body that faces life every day". A keynote by Pradeep Narayanan, Director of Research at the Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices (India) and Mary Robson, Research Associate at Durham University (UK) was a provocative reflection on *Making Change Sustainable when Culture is Political*. Dr Clive Parkinson presented an emotionally powerful performance drawing on his personal experience of living with cancer, interlaced with reflections on the intersections of human and planet health, in the film *SEDATIVE or STIMULANT: Consume by 24:06:21*. Kunle Adewale, Artist and Artistic Director of Arts in Medicine spoke about Nigeria's sustainability model for spreading arts and health work across Africa. In *Sew to Speak: Story Cloths for Healing*, we heard about the Common Threads Project's sustainable model of working creatively and therapeutically with women and children who have experienced sexual and gender based violence. Speakers from Ecuador and Nepal brought the voices of marginalised women centre stage and demonstrated how the process of "stitching the unspeakable" enables women to transform from victims to agents of change.

Across all the presentations and workshops, delegate feedback revealed that co-production and inclusive participation are of paramount interest along with supporting cultural democracy and combatting exclusion. Attendance was especially strong in sessions looking at professional development and practitioner support, led by Julia Puebla Fortier, Sue Isherwood and Jane Willis. There is a growing range of practice approaches and settings, from arts for wellbeing to specialised work with people who experience health or mental health conditions. The professional and personal demands on artists working with a health and wellbeing intention are increasingly recognised and point to the need for good professional training, early-career mentored practice experiences, and practitioner care including supervision and peer support networks (Fortier, 2021; Naismith, 2019). These must be accompanied by responsible commissioning practices that include appropriate compensation and a recognition of the skills and responsibilities artists must bring to arts and health work. Emerging efforts in several countries aim to bring more definition to these issues, and cross-national cooperation can lead to an expansive view of good practice that supports both participant and practitioner wellbeing.

## References

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