



The art of medicine

The intergenerational project: creating space for play in health care

If you were to ask adults about their experiences of hospitals, laughter and joy would not be typical responses. Hospitalisation can adversely affect mental and physical wellbeing, especially for older adults. The hospital environment may evoke feelings of distress, boredom, and isolation and can be a risk factor for functional decline, subsequently leading to increased morbidity and mortality. While paediatric wards tempt children towards escapism into a land of play with dedicated play therapists and toys, older adults can experience hours spent passively in bland surroundings with fleeting health-focused encounters rather than meaningful social interaction. Why is it assumed that older adults can do without this escapism? Playing can help to create social connections, provide cognitive stimulation, increase energy, and improve mood.

Increasingly, it is being recognised that care environments for older adults need to provide more holistic care. Links between the creative arts and health have been well explored, with the provision of art and music therapy now commonplace in many care settings. Similarly, physical activity provision often complements care for adults living with dementia. In recent years combining focused activities with intergenerational interaction has become a popular method of creating a socially stimulating environment with mutual benefit. For younger attendees, participation can aid the development of social skills and can influence more positive attitudes towards older adults. Benefits for older adults include developing social relationships, engagement in activities, and mood improvement.

Intergenerational work has predominantly taken place in community settings, linking playgroups or schools with residential homes or older adult community groups. However, intergenerational programmes can also be implemented in a hospital setting.

We are part of an intergenerational project that was piloted at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, London, UK, in 2017 to capture the joyful nature of play and bring fun, stimulation, and social connection to older people in hospital. The pilot brought local primary schoolchildren into the ward day room at St Mary's Hospital, London, to take part in a Christmas party with older adult inpatients. The workshop was run in partnership with the trust's dementia team, the Connecting Care for Children team, linked to the paediatric department, and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. After the pilot, the project secured funding from the Imperial Health Charity and was expanded into a programme of intergenerational multi-arts workshops. More than 150 patients from nine wards across two hospitals have taken part in about 50 workshops with over 90 children from five schools. At present the project is taking place in a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The workshops are facilitated by community organisations and freelance artists and practitioners, creating a wide range of activities, from drama, art and music to gardening, puppet making, and visits from farm animals. Activities were designed to encourage creativity, collaborative working, and play in a relaxed, safe environment. Before attending workshops, children are provided with education around dementia and the hospital setting. The training emphasises the importance of being patient and kind, encouraging interaction, and the asking of questions.

Through the intergenerational project, we have seen how shared play can traverse barriers between generations, patients and staff, and illness and health. The project welcomes older adults with a range of physical needs and varying degrees of cognitive impairment. Open participation is key, with one-to-one support provided by staff to enable patient participation where necessary. For patients, the workshops offer a much needed space for stimulation and engagement. Some take an active role whereas others enjoy sitting and observing, enveloped in the chatter and laughter of children. The workshops can also facilitate physical movement on occasion, providing encouragement for patients get out of bed and mobilise.

Crucially, the workshops offer social stimulus; the conversations that flow between adult and child are



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based around anything other than the reason behind the hospital admission. This distraction from preoccupations related to patients' health can help to break up the hospital experience, and for those who are separated from grandchildren it can provide much appreciated contact with the younger generation. For an hour, patients can be absorbed in an environment whose sole purpose is creating joy.

Children attend weekly workshops on a termly or annual basis. Far from being a chore, children often remark how much they enjoy visiting the hospital and meeting new people. On the educational visits at the beginning of the school year, any concerns the children have about visiting the hospital are explored: some are worried about feeling shy or about what questions to ask, and others wonder what to do if a patient falls over or feels unwell. Each concern is discussed and the children reassured that they can ask staff for help at any time. Although some children may initially seem a little apprehensive about engaging the patients in conversation, throughout the year they grow in confidence, becoming more comfortable in their interactions. Children often autonomously help patients with activities, create pieces of artwork that are given to be displayed in patient bed-spaces, and ask after patients in subsequent weeks. We have noticed how open and generous the children are in their interactions. Children invite patients into play irrespective of varying degrees of cognitive impairment or physical manifestations of time in hospital, such as plaster casts or nasogastric tubes. This unconditional welcoming is key in helping the older adults to feel comfortable and at ease.

The benefits of the project extend beyond immediate participants to the arts practitioners who deliver the workshops. The practitioners have developed expertise in facilitating intergenerational interactions. They have cultivated an understanding of the nuances of creating activities, which are suitable for those aged from 6 years to 106 years. It is hoped that practitioners will seek to deploy these skills in different settings, diversifying and expanding intergenerational practice within the community. Health-care staff are welcomed into each workshop and have also derived benefit through their involvement. Across the multidisciplinary team, staff have said that they look forward to the workshops and note their positive impact on the ward. They provide a moment for reflection where staff and patients can see each other in a different light, at ease in a relaxed environment and where staff can "care for people without being clinical", as one staff member shared. The project also offers opportunity for professional development, allowing staff to be involved in facilitating arts workshops and educational workshops in schools, applying their skills and specialist dementia knowledge outside the traditional hospital setting.

Collaboration lies at the heart of the intergenerational project. Through drawing together health and social care, education and the arts, a unique partnership has been created between different spheres, with each organisation and individual bringing their own ideas to the fore. The project thrives on creative thinking and is stimulated by a desire to enhance patient experience and wellbeing, and create joy. Offering intergenerational activities to patients creates opportunities for fun and stimulation and can promote wellbeing in a holistic, person-centred approach.

Bringing together children and older adults, including those with complex physical needs or cognitive impairment, presents challenges and requires careful risk assessment. There is no blueprint for intergenerational interactions in an acute hospital setting and establishing the project involves consideration of infection control, safeguarding, and what would happen in the event of an emergency. The explorative nature of the project is a testament to the passion and flexibility of the multidisciplinary organisations involved in its creation. By thinking creatively and making an effort to seek inspiration and create links outside health care, we can greatly improve the quality of the hospital experience, providing patients with time to play and some much needed respite from health-care interventions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented huge health and socioeconomic challenges. Alongside the acute impacts, the pandemic has highlighted how loneliness, isolation, and separation between the generations can be detrimental to both mental and physical health. For a lot of people, once lockdowns are lifted, socialising can resume and feelings of isolation will somewhat abate. But for many others, especially older adults and patients in hospital, loneliness and separation may persist. Perhaps the loneliness and boredom experienced by us all at moments during the COVID-19 pandemic provide pause for thought and bring renewed recognition of the need for services that offer human contact and social connection. The provision of health and social care shifted seismically in a short space of time during the pandemic and will continue to adapt, allowing it to respond to the changing demands of the pandemic and subsequent recovery. Hopefully, within the remodelling of post-pandemic services, care for older people will become a priority. Our intergenerational project is an example of how creativity and intergenerational interaction can bring joy to the most unlikely of settings and is a reminder that care for older adults needs to focus not only on the physical but also on the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of health.

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Further reading

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