



## Summary of an Arts and Health political symposium at the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen

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The political symposium for arts and health was held 22 March 2019. It was organised by Region Skåne and the WHO Regional Office for Europe, focusing on continued development of the arts and health area in the Nordic Region. The meeting was held in Copenhagen and was attended by public officials from the healthcare sector and the culture sector from Region Skåne. In addition, several civil servants attended from organizations including the Nordic Culture Fund, the Wellcome Trust (UK), Region Skåne (Sweden), Creative Business Network (Denmark), PiiPoo – Accessible Centre for Arts and Culture (Finland), Nord University and the Norwegian Resource Centre for Arts & Health (Norway). Researchers from Lund University, University of Arts Helsinki/ArtsEqual, Volda University College and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) were also present. At the meeting, participants shared results of current research and presented several good examples of arts and health practice. In addition, there were discussions and conversations about policy, practice and research.

### The Health Evidence Network (HEN) report on arts and health

The conference opened with introductory remarks by Gitte Grönfeldt Wille, Director of Cultural Affairs for Region Skåne and Nils Fietje, Research Officer from the WHO Regional Office for Europe. Nils Fietje explained that in recent years, WHO has increasingly become interested in research in the humanities and social sciences. Their activities include conducting the Cultural Context of Health (CCH) project that promotes a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that the healthcare system and the area of public health will be facing in the future. The panel of experts for this project have noted the role that art and culture play with regard to health and wellbeing, and have recommended that WHO

make an in-depth study of the area. As a result of this, the Division of Information, Evidence, Research and Innovation at the Regional Office has recently commissioned what is known as a Health Evidence Network synthesis report (HEN). Researcher Daisy Fancourt from University College London is commissioned to author the report, which is planned to be published later this year. The purpose is to provide decision-makers with an up-to-date summary of the state of research and evidence to be used for policy deliberations and decision-making.

Fancourt presented the preliminary comprehensive research findings, including studies from many parts of the world. She emphasized that there is clear and significant evidence that art and culture can have a positive effect both psychologically and physically. It was recommended that WHO continues to develop efforts in this area, suggesting that the cross-disciplinary approach of culture and healthcare can produce solutions for many major challenges in the area of healthcare for which no other solutions exist today. Arts and health initiatives are often cost-effective and do not involve any major risks. The area also concurs well with the goals found in the WHO policy document, Health 2020, and in the General Programme of Work 2019–23. The arts and health area can also be linked to Agenda 2030's Global Sustainable Development Goals. Fancourt stressed, however, that despite the strong evidence and all the good experience from various locations around the globe, much remains to be done. Efforts should be made to increase awareness and knowledge of this area amongst civil servants and the general public.

### **Strategic efforts in Region Skåne**

During the course of the day, Gitte Grönfeld Wille also presented Region Skåne's multi-year and strategic efforts in the area of arts and health. One important factor that contributed to the success of the region's initiatives has been the interdisciplinary policy strategy that both the Cultural Committee and the Healthcare System have adopted. This strategy has resulted in a good many projects and activities, such as hospital clowns, dance for patients with Parkinson's disease, and Arts on Prescription.

Gitte Grönfeld Wille emphasized that despite this strategy and several successful projects in the area, many challenges remain in the area of arts and health in Region Skåne. Although Region Skåne has implemented many successful projects and activities over the years, resources have seldom sufficed for in-depth analyses or research relating to the results of these projects. However, politicians often demand research results ahead of decisions regarding continued support. An additional difficulty is that arts and health activities rarely fit into traditional medical research, with its randomized and controlled studies, which politicians also want to see.

The five years Arts on Prescription pilot project in Helsingborg is an example of an activity that was not given the opportunity to continue and grow, despite positive research outcomes. Politicians maintained that they required additional research results in order to be able to make a decision regarding the resources that would be needed in order to implement this activity throughout Skåne. Implementations of projects into operational delivery is a common problem in the area of arts and health. Once the temporary financing has ceased, it is often easier to start new projects than to make a decision to authorize a more long-term activity.

## Shared Reading

A current initiative in Region Skåne is to establish Shared Reading initiatives across the region. This is being done in cooperation with Anders Ohlsson, Professor of Literary Studies at Lund University, who was the next speaker. Anders Ohlsson emphasized that Shared Reading is primarily a method that encourages reading. In the United Kingdom, Shared Reading is frequently offered to people at risk socially, but also to people suffering from, for example, dementia, or those with other mental health problems. The method involves reading aloud, which can expose a person to literature without requiring that person to read on his or her own. Reading aloud takes place in groups, thus creating an opportunity to be part of a structure, and encouraging new social networks. The groups read works of literature together followed by conversation about the literature, often involving existential issues and giving the participants a platform for expressing their feelings and experiences in their own words as well as discussing the text. British research has shown that Shared Reading has additional benefits, such as increasing wellbeing and providing enhanced quality of life.

Lund University and Region Skåne organized a conference and several training programmes in order to teach this method to relevant persons. Anders Ohlsson and his colleagues are also conducting a research study about the possible effect of the Shared Reading method on the quality of life of patients with chronic pain.

## Nordic cooperation

Anita Jensen, Arts and Health strategist at Region Skåne and postdoctoral researcher at Aalborg University, Denmark, offered the final presentation at the symposium. She provided an historic overview of the development of arts and health area in the Nordic countries during the past ten years. Her presentation confirmed the preliminary conclusions by Daisy Fancourt in the HEN report. The Nordic countries have been working with this area during a long period of time, and concepts regarding the importance of art and culture for health and wellbeing are relatively well established here; however, there are still many barriers and challenges to overcome in the Nordic context.

The social welfare systems of the Nordic countries have great similarities, as do the challenges faced by the societies of these countries. Anita Jensen advocated increased Nordic cooperation relating to arts and health. She also discussed the Nordic Arts and Health Research Network, as well as the planned *Nordic Journal for Arts, Culture and Health*.

## Round-table discussions

After the presentations, round-table discussions took place. These primarily related to obstacles and challenges facing the implementation of the arts, culture and health area on the regional, national and international levels.

The attendees agreed that one major challenge was that the area requires increased trans-sectoral and inter-policy cooperation. Our society is characterized by a great deal of silo thinking, and an area such as arts and health can easily fall between the cracks, as no one assumes the primary responsibility for its development. The attendees agreed that ownership of this area must be shared. The group also characterized increased long-term perspective and more sustainable financing as additional important factors. In order to develop this area, long-term political support with regard to national strategies, for example, would be desirable.

The desire for increased Nordic cooperation in this area was also discussed. The Nordic Council of Ministers was identified as an important party if this is to come about, and the representatives of the Nordic Culture Fund volunteered to present this idea at an initial meeting between the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the Nordic Council of Ministers. Someone suggested that the Nordic countries should jointly initiate efforts to share their experiences and knowledge and stimulate the development of this area in other countries. The importance of the arts and health area to cultural stakeholders and entrepreneurs was also discussed. The group maintained among other things that measures were needed to inspire the private sector and entrepreneurs to get involved in this area.

On behalf of the WHO Regional Office for Europe, Niels Fietje summarized the day's proceedings and thanked the attendees for providing a greater insight into the challenges and opportunities found in this area. WHO appreciated the proposed measures that can be considered by WHO Regional Office for Europe in order to support the arts and health area. These can be summarized as follows:

- Disseminating knowledge and reports from the Cultural Context of Health (CCH) project, especially those regarding arts and health.
- Translating and packaging publications and results of research so that they become more understandable and accessible, and can be used by decision-makers.
- Advocating and promoting the arts and health area on a broader based level throughout the WHO European Region.

Finally, the attendees emphasized the major importance that the involvement of the WHO Regional Office for Europe has for the legitimacy of the arts and health area.

Political symposium on the arts and health in the Nordic region. State of the evidence (2019).

Link to report:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/data-and-evidence/cultural-contexts-of-health-and-well-being/publications/political-symposium-on-the-arts-and-health-in-the-nordic-region.-state-of-the-evidence-2019>