



A summary of the launch of the WHO report on the evidence base for arts and health, Helsinki, Finland, 11 November 2019

Liisa Laitinen

Adviser, Arts & Health, Arts Academy, Turku University of Applied Sciences

liisa.laitinen@turkuamk.fi

The World Health Organization (WHO) launched the report ‘What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review’ on 11 November 2019, in Helsinki, Finland. The launch event was organized by WHO Regional Office for Europe in collaboration with the Finnish Arts & Health Coordination Centre Taikusydän, the Arts Academy, Turku University of Applied Sciences, Arts Promotion Centre Finland, University of the Arts Helsinki, KULTA Central Organization for Finnish Culture and Arts Associations, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Wellcome Trust. Approximately 70 invited guests attended the launch event, held at the Helsinki Music Centre. Over 400 people followed the event’s livestream on WHO’s website.

The Finnish Minister of Science & Culture, Hanna Kosonen, opened the event by discussing the significance of the report in terms of mapping the evidence linking arts with health. Kosonen highlighted the significance of the long-lasting cross-sectoral collaboration between the arts and cultural sector and the social and healthcare sector, spanning across several government terms and manifesting itself in arts and culture being considered an important part of the promotion of well-being and health in Finland. She encouraged all decision-makers to consider the potential of arts and culture in health and well-being promotion.

A pre-recorded message by Pirooska Östlin, Regional Director for WHO Europe (ad interim) stated that the report illustrated how the arts can tackle some complex health challenges, such as ill mental health, offering additional solutions to common medical practice. Östlin was hopeful that the report could help shift the discussion into the policy arena and encourage ministries of health to examine some of the policy options outlined in the report.

Nils Fietje, Research Officer from WHO Regional Office for Europe, presented the context for the report, which is linked to the WHO Cultural Contexts of Health and Wellbeing (CCH) programme. The project serves as a platform that systematically seeks to understand how cultural contexts affect health and well-being, articulating why culture matters in public health and public health policy-making. The report was commissioned as part of the CCH project to examine the question around the evidence base of how the arts can affect health and well-being.

One of the authors of the report, Daisy Fancourt, University College London, UK, presented the report, making references to the over 900 publications, 200 reviews covering over 3000 further studies that the report includes, making the report the most comprehensive evidence review of arts and health to date. The authors Fancourt and Finn (2019) carried out the work as a scoping review, trying to understand both the breadth as well as depth of studies from the field. Fancourt provided an overview of some of the findings, structured into two broad sections: prevention and promotion of illness, and the management and treatment of health conditions, and went on to illustrate the findings with some of the case studies of practise presented in the report.

Debs Teale, Expert by experience and Peer Project Support Officer from Creative Minds, UK, shared her story of how taking part in art classes had provided a powerful transformative effect and helped her find a new direction in life. Teale described how joining an Arts for Wellbeing programme supported her recovery from mental illness, and how she now gives talks about her journey all over the UK, sharing how a social prescribing project has impacted on her life.

Discussing the policy implications of the WHO Arts & Health report

After a short artistic intervention, led by Music Education Lecturer Katja Thomson, University of the Arts Helsinki, discussion continued with a session focusing on the value of the report and policy implications in Finland. Director General Riitta Kaivosoja, Ministry of Education & Culture, and Director Taru Koivisto, Ministry of Social Affairs & Health discussed the recent developments in the field, the long tradition for multi-sectoral approaches in Finland, and the need for long-lasting structures and mechanisms that support the collaboration between the health and arts sectors, including the need to move forward to make policies.

The final session of the day explored the political implications of the report within the Nordic region and internationally. Moderator Nils Fietje was joined by Daisy Fancourt, Taru Koivisto, Senior Advisor Annika Söderlund, Nordic Council of Ministers, Healthcare Commissioner Anna Starbrink, Stockholm County Council (Sweden) and Researcher Vegar Rangul, National Center for Culture, Health & Care (Norway) for a roundtable discussion. A wide variety of themes was discussed, including the possibilities and challenges of mainstreaming arts and health in the policy arena, the relevance of arts and health to health equity, questions relating to scaling up arts and health initiatives, and funding models in the field. While the situation varies from country to country, and the experience of arts and health initiatives are considerably different in terms of how they are initiated as well as how policies are made and implemented, there are many overarching themes for future actions that resonate in various Member States across the WHO European Region. For example, a better understanding of the health economics of arts interventions is still needed, common understanding and shared ownership between the sectors needs to be built, and more detailed knowledge gained about effective implementation of arts and health activities and programmes. Creating opportunities to share experiences between countries was considered important, and further support from the WHO Regional Office in relation to this was also welcomed.

The WHO Regional Office will continue to work with the arts and health theme, within the European Region and globally, including producing short films, the publication of Public Health Panorama's special issue on Arts & Health (2020) and maintain collaboration with stakeholders to encourage further policy development in the field.

References

- Fancourt, D. & Finn, S. (2019). *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*. Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe: Copenhagen. Retrieved from: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/what-is-the-evidence-on-the-role-of-the-arts-in-improving-health-and-well-being-a-scoping-review-2019>
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