

Progress of The Art Collection at The Children's Hospital Westmead, NSW, Australia

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Commentary

In the early 1990s the decision was taken to move The Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children from its 89 year old home in the inner Sydney, suburb home in Camperdown, (NSW, Australia) to the outer Sydney suburb of Westmead, the geographical centre of greater Sydney with the fastest growth in population and where the hospital would be in easier reach of a greater number of families with children.

When the building opened in 1995 it was equipped with the latest state of art medical equipment and provided the best medical attention, however the then chief executive, Dr John Yu, wanted the new hospital to offer more. He wanted it to have a comfortable, caring ambience which would be neither a forbidding nor a frightening place for its patients and one which would embrace and comfort their parents and provide the best working conditions for its dedicated staff. He wanted to create an atmosphere which would diminish anxiety and relieve the pressure that is caused by being in hospital or having a child as a patient. He wanted to create an atmosphere which would radiate a pleasant, friendly ambience to help to lower stress levels and create a feeling of well-being in the patients, to help aid their recovery.

In order to do this it was decided to place artworks including paintings, works on paper, sculpture, photographs and murals throughout the hospital and in its 11.2 hectare grounds. In 1993 Dr Yu asked me to be the honorary curator at the hospital, a position I held until 2015 and still retain a curatorial overview.

The hospital in on three levels, full of a light, bright color schemes and internal garden courtyards with the hidden surprise of a magnificent Chinese garden at its heart. My idea was to fill all areas of the building with art; I wanted the art to be of a high standard, good pieces and representative works by good artists including works by both established and young contemporary artist. I wanted pieces which would amuse, inspire and intrigue, pieces which could help provide areas of solitude and tranquillity when it was needed; pieces which would interest children, parents, visitors and, equally importantly, the staff. I did not feel it was necessary to have art with childish themes, though they were not completely excluded. Children relish and appreciate art in their own way and enjoy a very wide variety of subjects. I wanted to provide art which they might not have seen before, art which could provide a subconscious learning curve. There was to be nothing forbidding or frightening, nothing with a political content, nothing which could offend anyone from the diverse cultural backgrounds who come to the hospital. I did not rule out provocative work, but not offensive ones, and I certainly was prepared to include a few pieces which could, and have, caused discussions.

I had a very small budget for the initial purchases and once that was spent on major pieces for the hospital entrance and foyer and some key

walls I turned to collectors, donors, artists, photographers and private art galleries and asked them to donate artworks to the collection. Their response was and continues to be, magnificent and is the reason why today the hospital collection has over 2,000 works of art in it and the collection continues to grow. The help of these gifts was greatly encouraged by the tax deductible cultural gifts scheme from the Federal Governments' Ministry of Arts.

When it was decided to paint murals in areas where it was not suitable to place artworks, including the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit and the ward walls, I approached the Design School of the West of Sydney University, who designated the project as part of their class work for their second year students. The students worked with their professors, the Nurse Unit managers and me to provide some wonderful images. Murals in other place, such as procedures rooms and in medical imaging where donated by the artists or funded by donors.

As well as curating the art program I chaired a committee with the Art Department of the NSW Ministry for Education and Communities for a project called Operation Art. We approached all schools throughout NSW and asked if they would submit four artworks by their students from Kindergarten to year 10, for children in hospital. After a quiet beginning with fifty entries it has continued to grow in popularity and this year there were over 800 entries all of which are exhibited in the well patronized Amory Gallery in the Sydney Olympic Park. Each year 50 of the works in the exhibition are selected to be hung in the hospital, with other works going to children's wards in hospitals throughout the state as well as to hospitals overseas. Before the chosen 50 come to the hospital to be hung amongst the collection they are exhibited at The Art Gallery of NSW, the state art museum, and in a number of regional NSW galleries.

The twenty plus years I spent curating the collection were extremely rewarding although at times challenging. No two days were alike and it was always interesting to find out what each day would bring. Some of the best days were when I was hanging new works and listening to the excited comments that came from the patients, the parents and the staff. Everyone always had a view and there were some very good interchanges of ideas.

When I began to add artworks to the hospital walls there was a certain skepticism from the staff about the need for art in a hospital. Apart from a number of works and murals by the artist, Pixie O'Harris, closely based on children's fairy stories, at the old children's hospital in Camper down, there were only two other hospitals in Australia, both in Perth, WA which had art collections and they were adult hospitals. There was also a general feeling that if there had to be art in a children's hospital the artworks should be more in accord with children's fairy stories. Having long worked with introducing children to art I was

aware that they can get as much from looking at 'adult' artworks as adults do and are often are for more perceptive.

It has been very interesting to see the mood in the hospital change over my years there from one when having art in the hospital was queried to one when art is now considered the norm and when wards and rooms are repainted or reconfigured the first demand is for artworks to be put on the walls. There is also no more demand for what may be regarded as childish paintings.

From the beginning of this project there was a great interest in art collection at The Children's Hospital at Westmead, as the hospital is now known, from hospitals throughout Australia, which were being built or renovated. Today many more Australian hospitals have exchanged their bare walls to ones which include artworks. While they do not necessarily follow the same presentation as that of The Children's Hospital at Westmead and there are a number of different formats, behind all of them is the thesis that art in hospitals helps to make them a kinder, friendlier places for patients, families and staff. This idea was boosted in July this year when the NSW Minister of Health, Gilliam Skinner, acknowledged that 'Art already plays and important part in the patient journey in NSW hospitals and health facilities' as she launched the state governments Health and Art Framework which encourages local health districts to create health and art projects throughout the state.

After twenty plus years of running the art collection, producing catalogues and running tours for interested patients, parents, staff and groups I felt it was time for a new, younger, person to take over running the collection and to bring fresh ideas to it. The hospital successfully applied to the Packer and Crown Foundations for funds to support the position and we were very fortunate to find Ivy Baddock to take on the role. Ivy has the double advantage of having a strong background in the arts and for having been a parent of a child who was treated at the hospital. This is very important as it gives her an insight into the very different needs that occur when curating a collection in a hospital than to being a curator in a museum or art gallery. In those places a visitor is expecting to see art on the walls, in a hospital although artworks are becoming more familiar, it is still unusual and it is very important for a curator to be sensitive to the needs of everyone in the hospital at all times. While in many instances objections and queries can be anticipated and relatively easy to deal with, there are occasions when unforeseen sensibilities may be touched and need to be carefully handled

Ivy has introduced a number of new ideas on how to use the collection in and to maximize on the artworks. These include working with the Hospital School program (any child who is hospital for more than five days is required, when possible to attend one of the hospital's schools); as well as an interactive Sculpture Walk and Art Trails.

The School program is for secondary students, aged 12-17, the program aims to extend the students ability to interpret and describe a visual text, helping them extend their vocabulary and investigation skills by describing the art works they can see around them in the collection and helping them try to deduce the artist's meaning or intention.

The Art Trails is being set up for different parts of the hospital. The Trails will be available on the intranet for nurses to print out as required. The intention is to encourage patients to leave their beds and engage with the art collection in a fun and playful way. It can also be utilized for children in the Outpatients department who may be waiting for extended periods of time between doctor's appointments and they can also be a valuable tool for entertaining, often very bored, siblings. The basic premise is to find particular artworks and investigate them a little more closely, with queries such as 'who do you see in the artwork?', 'what do you think will happen next?' 'what do you think this animal is thinking'?, with a space for written replies in a speech bubble.

The Sculpture walk brochure - Is a printed 10 page color booklet which encourages children to explore the sculptures in the art collection which are displayed both inside and within the Hospital grounds. Again the aim is to enable children (patients, siblings, families, etc.) to further engage with artworks within the art collection, providing a source of entertainment and stimulation. This resource has also been provided to the Child Life Therapy team to motivate patients as they begin familiarization with new walking aids, etc. They can move around the Hospital searching for sculptures whilst gaining confidence with their new equipment

Ivy also has a number of other plans including an app for an iPad which can be only used in the hospital, taking patients, their parents and siblings on a journey around the collection giving them information about specific artworks and their artists. Once this has been developed it too can be used by the school for teaching the arts syllabus.

Ivy is still conducting tours and has re-written the self-guided tour for children and adults.

There will be new challenges when the hospital expands in the years ahead and there will be many more walls and wards that will need art works.

I am delighted to observe the way the collections has evolved and continues to grow and embraces the ever developing new technology while continuing to provide the initial desire to help make the hospital a friendlier, comforting place for its patients, parents and the staff.