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Creative Self-Expression for Hospitalized Patients: The Practice and Assessment of an Innovative Oral Storytelling Program at the University of Michigan Health System

Presenters: Jeffrey E. Evans, PhD, Clinical Associate Professor, UMHS Dept. of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and the Residential College; Elaine Sims, MA, Director, UMHS Gifts of Art Program; Ami Walsh, MFA, Writer-in-Residence, UMHS Gifts of Art Program

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Hospital-based narrative art intervention programs have traditionally focused on offering patients opportunities for creative self-expression through the act of writing. While recognizing that translating emotional experiences into language can have tangible health benefits (as extensively documented by Dr. James Pennebaker, among others), not all patients can or want to write. Therefore we sought to offer the same opportunities for creative self-expression by inviting patients to record personal narratives.



Our program was started two years ago by a multi-disciplinary team, including an arts in healthcare pioneer (Elaine Sims), a rehabilitation psychology and neuropsychology clinician (Jeffrey Evans), and a professional writer (Ami Walsh). The mission of our program is to provide expressive storytelling activities at the bedside that honor the patient's sense of self, offer comfort and hope, and support a hospital experience that dignifies the individual.

Patients who participate in our program are often referred by the clinical team or by other hospital artists-in-residence from the visual or musical arts. Our writer-in-residence meets with patients at the bedside and helps them identify an audience for their story. This surfaces the patient's intentions for telling a story, and insights around what to say often spontaneously come to mind. After exploring how to organize the material into a narrative structure, the writer-in-residence records patients telling their stories. Many patients select music to mix into their recordings, and audio editing is done during the session.

THE COLLABORATION PROCESS

Like "StoryCorps," heard regularly on National Public Radio, our program enables individuals who might not otherwise record a story to do so. However, in the hospital setting, patients do not embark on the storytelling experience knowing exactly what they want to say or engaging in a series of pre-determined questions. Our model relies on a more collaborative process between patient and facilitator and sessions usually take 90 minutes, concluding with participants receiving the edited piece on a CD at no charge.

We will review four key strategies the writer-in-residence uses when working with participants:

- Creates a frame
- Inhabits the story
- Finds the structure
- Stays in the “wake”

THE RESEARCH

We will provide an overview of the research we are currently conducting to formally assess the program and the bedside storytelling experiences of 100 hospitalized patients. Our preliminary findings suggest the storytelling experience—including telling the story, recording the story, and sharing the story with others—offers patients an enhanced sense of well-being, purpose, and self-efficacy. Our initial findings also suggest patients and their families elect to participate in the program for the following reasons:

- Interested in recording a story to share with others
- Distraction from illness or boredom
- Looking for company
- Curious about the experience of recording a story

In addition, we are examining the stories themselves not only for insight about the hospitalized patient experience, but for their ability to enhance our collective understanding of the role creativity and human resiliency play in sustaining and supporting personal identity in the face of illness, chronic illness, and disability.

We will share some of our initial findings—including recorded comments from participants themselves—from this research.

Research Team:

Claudia Drossel, Postdoctoral Fellow	Jeffrey E. Evans, Principal Investigator
Katherine Globerson, Research Assistant	Robin Goldberg, Research Assistant
Jessica Hinshaw, Postdoctoral Fellow	Nancy Merbitz, Co-Investigator
Stefanie Moraes, Co-Investigator	Kimberly Peters, Postdoctoral Fellow
Elaine Sims, Co-Investigator	Ami Walsh, Writer-in-Residence

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