

(GP Magazine April 13th 2001)

Art Deco Brightens a Dull Wait

A project funded by the Arts Council aims to add the human touch to austere waiting rooms and remove patients' fears.

Eileen Fursland reports on the achievement of poetic licence.

Patients waiting to see Dr Christina Cock at her surgery in Gateshead, Tyne & Wear, don't have to sit looking at posters sternly warning them to give up smoking, or leaf through dog-eared copies of *Woman's Own*.

Instead, they can contemplate paintings or pieces of sculpture by local artists, or read poems displayed on the wall - poems which have particular resonance because their theme is the experience of waiting.

Dr Cock's Oxford Terrace Medical Group surgery is

taking part in the Poems for the Waiting Room project. It is just one of around 130 waiting rooms in GPs' surgeries, health centres and hospitals across the country which are now displaying poems from a collection specially commissioned to address the subject of 'waiting'.

It was funded by the Arts Council which saw the project as a worthy beneficiary for its "New Audiences" funding scheme. The organisation provided a £20,000 one-off grant to pay for the poets, printing costs and administration.

As they wait to be seen, patients can reflect on poems by celebrated poets such as the poet laureate Andrew Motion, Dannie Abse and Carol Ann Duffy, as well as many who are less well known.

"The poetry is like any other form of art in the health setting - it helps take people's mind off the reason why they are coming to see the doctor, it takes their mind off the anxiety," says Dr Cock.

“Every so often I get a little note from someone saying ‘how nice to see poetry’ and in fact, as a result, three or four patients have brought in their own poems and we have put those up too,” she adds.

Dr Cock feels that waiting rooms often further intimidate people who may already be feeling intimidated.

“We try to unmedicalise the waiting room. We have the medical posters and leaflets in a corridor outside instead. The idea is to show that we are all human beings in the health service as well. It really doesn’t cost anything – it’s not as if we are taking money away from patient care,” she says.

Rogan Wolf, the independent social worker who came up with the idea for the project, points out for many people, the time they spend in a waiting room can be a lonely and anxious experience.

“A human touch can prove to be very helpful. Poetry sometimes does that work better than anything, touching without imposing. It

can make the waiting experience less lonely,” he explains.

The poems were commissioned by poet David Hart, who has been involved in arts and health projects for years.

They are printed as small posters and can be displayed, for example, in a picture frame or on a notice board. With the collection of 52 poems provided free of charge, health centres can display a few at a time on a rotational basis.

Diane Walker works at Chesterfield Royal Hospital in Derbyshire, where clients with a range of mental health problems take part in groups such as art therapy and creative writing. The poems are displayed in an area where people have cups of tea and coffee while waiting for groups and activities to begin.

“I put a book next to the poems, asking for feedback. People have written comments in the book and have suggested other poems they would like to see or they

have asked if they could bring in poems they have written themselves,” she says.

A second collection of poems - this time funded by the King’s Fund - is about to go to the printer. These will be more traditional poems, on a variety of themes and subjects from all periods.

Maureen Woolf is a counsellor at a mental health assessment unit for older people in Nuneaton. The unit is part of the North Warwickshire NHS Trust and Ms Woolf uses art therapy in her work.

“I have used poems as therapy with groups of older people. I choose poems they might remember from their schooldays and these seem to release and trigger memories and bring back feelings which people haven’t experienced for quite a long time” she says.

“People in hospital do so much waiting – for mealtimes, doctors, visitors, review meetings and so on. Time drags, sometimes unbearably so. I hope the poems will help people see that we realise that.”

“Poems for the Wall” is managed by the charity Hyphen21.

Web-site : <https://poemsforthewall.org> E-mail: r.wolf@hyphen-21.org