

HEALTH

Spirit Levellers

Instead of sitting and worrying, patients in waiting rooms now have the chance to chill out to the soothing, inspirational words of masters such as Yeats and Wordsworth. Eileen Fursland looks at the positive power of poetry

Patients at several London health centres and hospitals can now while away their time, as they wait for their appointments, with something more uplifting than a newspaper or magazine or simply staring at the wall. Or rather, if they do stare at the wall, they may be inspired by what they see there.

Specially chosen poems are on display as part of the new Poems for the Waiting Room scheme, pioneered by the Poetry Society and freelance social worker Rogan Wolf.

"Waiting rooms can be soulless places," says Wolf. "People can feel they are about to become just a collection of symptoms. By putting up the poems, the surgery is addressing the whole person. It is saying, 'Here's some soul, speaking to yours.'"

"People waiting to see doctors are likely to be in a receptive mood," says Chris Meade, director of the Poetry Society. "Poetry can be quite a subtle way of helping them to think around their situation."

"Even people who don't read much poetry sometimes come across poems they keep in their minds, have a strong emotional attachment to and fall back on in times of crisis."

The poems used in the project have been chosen to enrich the time that people spend in the waiting room and perhaps also to give them some thoughts to take away with them.

From a long list of suggestions supplied by the Poetry Society, a small group of health and social workers got down to the sensitive business of selecting suitable poems.

"We felt it was crucial that practitioners who work directly with the clients or patients, rather than administrators, should do the choosing," says Wolf. "The criteria were that the poem or extract must be short, it must be accessible and not leave people feeling confused. And it must not be too disturbing. The poems were selected to help affirm people's sense of self at a time when it might feel under threat."

The project began around a year ago in a small way, with Wolf providing poems to a handful of GP surgeries and also to the Paterson Centre, a busy psychiatric hospital in Paddington, London. But with the help of a small grant from the King's Fund and some Lottery money awarded to the Poetry Society, the scheme is starting to take off.

About 35 sites around London - belonging to the Riverside community health care NHS trust, Northwest London mental health NHS Trust, and Westminster social services - have now received poems as part of the project. A number of these centres have several different waiting areas, so in all there are now around 50 poems displayed in a wide range of settings — from comfortable, attractive GP surgeries in middle-class areas of London to a health centre serving the needy population of a large west London housing estate. Social services waiting rooms and old people's homes also have poems on their walls.

Poems on the Underground was an obvious model and inspiration for the project, says Wolf. A number of poems are taken from *The Rattle Bag* anthology, whose publisher, Faber and Faber, like other publishers, have granted copyright free of charge.

The poems range from traditional ones from poets such as Wordsworth, Blake and Yeats to contemporary work. There is also a Navaho chant. With *Beauty May I Walk*, which offers the hope: "In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk; In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk; It is finished in beauty. It is finished in beauty"

Another of the poems is Yeats's *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, which ends; "But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

"This poem offers an awareness and a sharing of a sense of fragility and complexity, but also celebrates it," says Wolf. "It acknowledges something that isn't normally put into words, especially in modern times when the spiritual lacks a contemporary language."

"The poems we chose met something in me and they met something in the rest of the selecting group. So, ultimately, we just have to take it on faith that some patients in the waiting room will find the poems speak for them to some degree, as they spoke for us."

Wolf has also used the collection of poems for readings to care staff and clients at the Paterson Centre psychiatric in-patient unit.

One or two doctors are already convinced that poetry has a lot to offer. For example, at Withymoor village surgery in the West Midlands, Dr Malcolm Rigler has employed a poet-in-residence as well as live music, theatre, artists and craftspeople to help develop his patients' creativity and quality of life. His premises have become as much a community arts centre as a GP surgery. The philosophy is that, rather than a place where patients wait for something to happen, the waiting room or surgery foyer should be a "creative space where the path to wholeness begins".

Dr Robin Philipp, a consultant occupational physician at Bristol Royal Infirmary, often reads poetry with his patients, many of whom have mental health problems. He is carrying out a clinical trial as part of a World Health Organisation project on mental health, which he hopes will add weight to the abundant anecdotal evidence he has collected on the benefits of "poetry therapy".

Chris Meade sees an increasing role for poetry in the health service. "We've got poets in all sorts of other places — London Zoo, Marks & Spencer, schools — and we'd like to do something innovative in health too" he says.

"There are lots of ways of finding poems to put around the place. But perhaps more important is building the confidence of the people working in these settings that this could be a useful tool to help them do their job."

Far more information on Poems for the Waiting Room, write to Rogan Wolf, Bishop Creighton House, 378 Lillie Road London SW6 7PH (0208-871-4020).