

Sound body, sound mind, sound investment—effective creative ageing strategies for regional Australia

Margret Meagher¹

¹Arts and Health Australia and The Australian Centre for Creative Ageing, NSW

Margret Meagher is one of the leading figures in ‘arts and health’ in Australia. Spanning four decades, Margret’s career in arts marketing, communications and management has been underpinned by a strong belief in the positive impact that the arts and creativity can have on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Over the past decade, Margret has focused specifically on the growing field of arts and health, presenting on the arts in health care across primary and acute care, aged care, community health, health promotion, education and research. Speaking engagements have included the Society for Arts in Healthcare international conferences in Chicago (2006), Nashville (2007), Philadelphia (2008), Buffalo (2009) and Minneapolis (2010). Margret’s presentation at 9th National Rural Health Conference, Albury, NSW in March 2007 was on the topic ‘How the arts in health care can make a difference in rural and remote regions in Australia’ and at 10th National Rural Health Conference, Cairns in May 2009 she spoke about ‘Arts and Health in Australia—Keeping Pace with International Trends’. The topic for her presentation in 2011 is ‘Sound mind, sound body, sound investment—effective creative ageing strategies for regional Australia’.

Margret is the founding Executive Director of Arts and Health Australia (AHA) (www.artsandhealth.org), a national advocacy and networking organisation, based in Port Macquarie NSW, providing a central resource for the arts, health, education and government sectors in Australia. AHA is working with the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, on an outreach research project on art and dementia.

AHA is active in facilitating international connections and dialogue with key arts and health organisations globally, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre for Medical Humanities at University of Durham and Arts in Healthcare, Manchester Metropolitan University in England. AHA is the regional partner for Australia and New Zealand for the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, the peak international arts and health organisation, based in Washington DC. Margret is also the founder of the Australian Centre for Creative Ageing, which is affiliated with the National Center for Creative Aging in the USA.

Margret is a board member of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners’ Foundation (RACGPF) and a long standing member of the arts judging panel of the Churchill Fellowship Trust (NSW).

Arts and Health Australia convened the inaugural annual international arts and health conference—The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing—in Port Macquarie in November 2009. The second annual conference followed in November 2010 in Melbourne, where the third annual arts and health conference will also be held from 15 to 18 November 2011. (email: info@artsandhealth.org)

Australia’s ageing population poses a major challenge for health professionals and health service providers, especially in rural and regional areas.

The increasing rate of life expectancy in Australia, the consistent rise in the incidence of chronic diseases and the emergence of ‘loneliness’ and social exclusion as a critical factor in the social determinants of health stress the critical importance of identifying health care solutions—that promote positive ageing and prevention as well as providing support for people with chronic conditions such as dementia and their carers.

Scientific evidence and qualitative evaluations have demonstrated the efficacy of the arts in delivering positive health outcomes for all age demographics across a range of conditions—such as depression, cardiovascular disease, arthritis, obesity, asthma and diabetes.

The ageing sector is often overlooked, despite the urgency with which governments need to address the requirements of a rapidly increasing ageing population.

This paper will present best-practice models of arts and health programs designed for older Australians to maintain their independence and follow a healthy lifestyle, as well as including information about programs for conditions such as dementia, which have been devised by the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Scientific evidence will be presented, drawing on arts and health research in Australia and overseas, with specific application to health care for older Australians in regional and remote areas. And the business case for creative ageing strategies will be examined.

Alongside the therapeutic benefits to patients and carers, arts and health programs will also be shown to provide environmental improvements to support staff, and ways in which the arts can be employed to produce more creative kinds of health promotion information.

Arts and health initiatives that will be showcased include programs in hospitals, aged care facilities, community services, rehabilitation, health promotion and medical education. These programs illustrate the multidisciplinary nature of arts and health practice, bringing together people in health, arts, education and the voluntary sector and demonstrate practical ways to adapt these programs for individual rural and regional communities.