Investigating the positive impact of the visual arts on patients with ophthalmic conditions

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The recent Keeler Lecture, ‘Vision, eye disease, and art’, delivered by MF Marmor (1) highlights the complexities of vision and art. It is not an uncommon belief that sight-impaired individuals are unable to appreciate art. Whilst a 2004 review for the Arts Council England cited almost 400 papers demonstrating the positive impact of art in healthcare (2), there is no published literature on the role of visual art in the ophthalmology setting.

To address this an art and photography exhibition was held at Moorfields Eye Hospital, London, UK. Patients, staff and visitors, both sighted and sight-impaired, were invited to respond to a pre-validated questionnaire asking agreement on a 5-point Likert scale to statements about art appreciation and display in the healthcare setting.

There were 102 respondents: 39% male, 61% female; mean age 50.7 years (range 17-90); 65% were patients and those accompanying them, 28% staff; 54% had an ophthalmic condition, 51% of these bilateral.

An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that display of visual art in the hospital improves patient experience (92%), relaxes patients (91%), makes clinic waiting times more bearable (85%) and improves staff morale (70%). For the first two statements, agreement was stronger amongst staff and visitors than patients (Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA, p=0.007 and p=0.016).
and amongst those without an eye condition versus those with (Mann Whitney U; p=0.006 and p=0.02). The display of tactile art was thought to be beneficial for the visually-impaired patient experience by 86% of respondents.

Of those with an ophthalmic condition, 77% agreed/strongly agreed that they enjoyed visual art and 75% could express themselves through art-creation similarly to before visual problems developed, with no difference between those with unilateral versus bilateral disease (Mann Whitney U; p=0.107 and p=0.129).

Our results demonstrate strong opinion that visual art positively enhances patient and staff experience in ophthalmology, and proves that those with visual impairment are able to enjoy and create art. There is a suggestion that displaying tactile art may make a more significant improvement to the visually impaired patient experience. Future exhibitions showcasing tactile art could investigate this further.
References
