

Role of Museums in Public Health Awareness

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Abstract: A growing body of evidence has described that the role played in social inclusion of museums including the museums play in improving health and wellbeing is worth mentioning. Cultural heritage sector has always its implications in planning roles related to public health, which has remained one of the underdeveloped areas, especially signifying the art galleries and museums. The present discourse takes the onus to discuss the rationale for applying museums and art galleries for public health promotions and interventions in discussing the social role for the serving communities. A museum building is a sociable place: somewhere warm and safe which appeals to people of all ages and backgrounds.

1. Introduction

Experiencing illness (whether the illness of oneself or of one's loved ones) can cause physical, social and psychological suffering. Terminal illness causes in half of the patients an anxiety or depression, and half of them experience suicidal thoughts/behaviors. On the other hand, these sufferings affect their caregivers and loved ones, and the shared pain can worsen the suffering of the patients themselves (Krikorian et al., 2011). In response to such problems, hospitals all over the globe have developed palliative care to suffice these trends (Quill & Miller, 2014).

Museums have often been termed as “instruments of social responsibility” (Gurian, 2006). There are various museums that provide what we call direct social services, including literacy classes, parenting classes and even medical screenings (Gurian, 2006; Silverman, 2009). It has been suggested by various scholars that one of the ways that museums can fulfill a socially responsible role in their communities is by offering therapy and therapeutic programming (Silverman, 2009).

The aim of the present paper is to answer the question “How, with whom, and why are museums offering programming for people with life threatening illness?” While answering such problems, the field of museum will better understand this growing trend and its relationship to mission statements, to add up other museums can consider the role of programming within their own organizations.

2. Public Health Importance and Cancer Survivorship

Public health's longstanding mission has been to “prevent disease, prolong life, and promote health” through organized efforts across societies, organizations, communities, and individuals (Winslow, 1920). The mission of combating with both infectious and chronic diseases through research and surveillance, public health programs, health communication activities, and policy and system changes is the main aim of public health community. Cancer survivorship serves as an example of the dynamic work of the public work community in addressing this issue. Museums has an essential role in addressing the survivors and is uniquely bestowed to interfere through prevention of recurring diseases, cancers, and the side effects or

consequences of treatments to improve quality of life for each individual.

In case of Art therapy, it soundly uses art to take a tour of their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, fostering self-awareness, management of behavior and addictions, development of social skills, improving reality orientation, reducing anxiety, and increasing self esteem (AATA, 2014).

Public health and safety is now considered to be taken care of and understood to be the strongest link between museum collections and national security. Tracing back the historical approach of any disease of inheritance to identify their source or resource of origin, we often take the help of museum collections.(Hoffmaster et al., 2012).

3. Role of Museums

Since ages, museums have confirmed their community significance as educational providers, social anchors and stewards of our national heritage, earning reputation for tourism, job creation, attracting businesses to the community and serving as a source of immense civic and community pride (Cartmill and Day, 1997). As society has changed, so has the work of museums. Museums are facilitating job training programs, celebrating cultural diversity and awareness, teaching English as a Second Language classes and serving as locations for supervised visits through the family court system. In fact, museums are playing a significant role in many health care issues (Coffee, 2008).

Museums are also making a difference in a wide variety of disease prevention efforts: diabetes awareness, dental hygiene, stress relief techniques, acupressure and acupuncture, posture and scoliosis screening, gait analysis, bone density screening, blood pressure screening, rural health issues, emerging pathogens, immunizations at kindergarten readiness events, breast cancer support, brain awareness and community health fairs (Sendell and Nighingale, 2012).

As well-known providers of lifelong learning, museums educate communities about health care issues. Museums also play an important role surveying the public about their perceptions, concerns and wishes surrounding health care issues. Art, music, poetry and theater have all been proven to deliver profound healing benefits and museums are making a significant contribution in this area. Hospital patients around

the country are benefitting from therapeutic programs such as art therapy, bedside art-making and art videos (The National Archives, 2012).

The ability to observe carefully, describe accurately and then interpret what one sees is essential in clinical diagnosis (Winnicott, 1992). Because these skills are also requisite in the visual arts, museums began partnering with medical schools to help train the next generation of medical professionals.

Museums play an important role in teaching medical students, nursing students and other medical professionals to develop observational skills that can aid in proper diagnoses of patients (Camic, 2008).

4. Conclusion

The heritage sector is facing an unprecedented challenge and opportunity in being asked to contribute to arguably the most important issue affecting the world today, namely health and wellbeing (Ander et al., 2011). The museum sector has increasingly been aware of the possibility of valuing their work in terms of health and wellbeing. 'The Social Work of Museums' (2010) considers museums as places of inspiration and healing, and proposes that museums can contribute to individual health in at least five ways: promote relaxation; immediate intervention to affect beneficial changes in physiology, emotions or both; encourage introspection; public health advocacy; and enhancing healthcare environments (Corbin and Strauss, 2009). There is a growing body of evidence which describes the social inclusion role of museums and the role that museums play in improving health and wellbeing (Galloway and Bell, 2006). Research has shown that engaging in museums provides: positive social experiences, leading to reduced social isolation; opportunities for learning and acquiring new skills; calming experiences, leading to decreased anxiety; increased positive emotions, such as optimism, hope and enjoyment; increased self-esteem and sense of identity; increased inspiration and opportunities for meaning making; positive distraction from clinical environments, including hospitals and care homes; and increased communication between families, carers and health professionals. Given the wide range of benefits it is not surprising that more and more museums and galleries are adapting their access programmes to consider the wider social, health and wellbeing benefits that museum encounters can bring about. Museums, however, are very well placed to address issues such as social isolation, physical and mental ill-health and evidence suggests that museums can help to build social capital and resilience, and improve health and wellbeing (Thomson et al., 2011).

The Health and Social Care Act (2012) is bringing about considerable changes to the way health and social care services will be delivered in the future (Bacon et al., 2010). A key part of these health reforms sees a shift towards 'prevention is better than cure', within a model which will require a multi-agency approach with an increased reliance on third sector organisations such as charities, voluntary and community organisations. It is easy to see how museums could fit into this new era of health commissioning

considering the benefits, one of the biggest challenges facing the museums sector is understanding how best to meet these needs; here lessons from arts-in-health could help inform the museums sector.

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