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Study: art and music helps with the healing

by Monica Chamness
Staff Writer

It's Tuesday afternoon and a senior citizen is drawing a picture of a bumblebee, inspired by the classical music of Rimsky-Korsakov. She is one of many residents at St. Catherine Labouré Manor nursing home who are exposed to art and music each week through Body and Soul: The Art of Healing, which is intended to improve the psychological well-being of the patients.

Gemina Rio, nurse practitioner at St. Catherine's, recently concluded a 16-week study demonstrating the quantitative effects of the program on depression, pain control, mood and behavior patterns in their residents.

"Many people accept the idea that the arts have a place in health care and can help make patients feel better," said Rio. "It's always good to hear music and see art. But with science, you can see it does work. It has an effect."

Rio is not the only one interested in measuring the pros and cons of alternative therapies such as Body and Soul. A London hospital conducted a similar study in 2001, concluding access to the arts is beneficial for a person's health and well-being. That same year, a three-month study of hospice patients revealed significantly positive results on the effect of a single session of music in controlling the perception of pain. Another scientist has theorized that music can re-activate neural circuits damaged by organic brain disease associated with agitation and behavioral problems. The quandary over these studies is that there is no hard proof; the researchers used qualitative indicators.

"It has been proven that music has a positive effect on pain but those studies had no standardized protocols," said Rio. "Qualitative studies describe how they [the subjects] feel about it [the treatment in a study]. Quantitative is more experimental. You want numbers, an outcome measured by numbers." To uncover raw data on the mental state of the subjects, Rio employed tried-and- tested methodologies such as the Geriatric Depression Scale and the Minimum Data Set, section E.

"The GDS has been used in many studies," said Rio. "Scholars want proof that you are using a sensitive tool. Unless a tool has been used many times, one can't say it is sensitive or specific enough for that population. In the study, we used valuable and reliable measures."

Participating in the study was a random sample of 60 elderly men and women at River Garden (the control group) and St. Catherine Labouré Manor (the treatment group), both faith-based, not-for-profit, local nursing home facilities. Each month for 16 weeks, patients in the treatment group received two 15-minute visits from Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra musicians and two 15-minute visits from artists selected by Cummer Museum of Arts & Garden officials. The program is dubbed Room Service because it is administered in the residents' rooms. Subjects also received two 30-minute group activity sessions monthly, known as Helping Hands, where a solo artist plays music to the treatment group while each resident painted.

Following accepted guidelines for scientific research, Rio established criteria for patient participation. Most important was the patients' alertness and ability to hear.

Once the testing was complete, the results showed a statistically significant improvement in depression scores and in mood and behavior patterns. The study did not find clinically significant levels of pain relief for this same

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group. Rio attributes this outcome to the ongoing use of active pain management programs in both facilities.

Funded by a grant from the St. Vincent's Foundation, the music portion of the Body and Soul program is currently being offered at St. Catherine Labouré Manor, Mayo Clinic, Baptist Medical Center, Baptist Cancer Institute and Ronald McDonald House. Program executors will launch the same initiative this fall at Vicar's Landing, Westminster Woods, Community Hospice of Northeast Florida and River Garden Hebrew Home. Symphony musicians normally volunteer to play for an hour and a half, twice a week at St. Catherine's. James Jenkins, principal tubist for the JSO, not only volunteers his time, he is the founder of the program.

"At Baptist Medical Center, we took our Room Service program in, and on the first day, there was this woman who was comatose — totally unresponsive," said Jenkins. "She said the only thing that brought her out of the coma was the music. Many of the staff witnessed it."

Rio believes additional evaluation studies with larger sample sizes over a longer intervention period are necessary. At one and two years, she hopes to re-survey the participants to better gauge any long-term effects. Rio intends to publish her study in a medical journal.

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