

INDEPTH: HEALTH**Art for healing**

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A resident and her caregiver look at the artwork displayed in the Mamie Colton Gallery of Maimonides Geriatric Centre.

You know the colour “hospital green”? So identifiable is the blandness of the colour found in most health care facilities, that the phrase immediately conjures up images of sickness, despondency and despair. It’s really the last thing you want to look at when you’re trying to get better, right?

That’s what Gary Blair and partner Earl Pinchuk of Montreal thought when they visited a sick friend, an artist, who had been admitted to a Montreal hospital several years ago.

“When the experience was over, we looked at the ward where he died, and it was desolate and bleak, a typical hospital ward,” Blair says. “We realized we could have brought art in, his art in fact, and made the area where he spent his last days a lot more warm and humane.”

Pinchuk had also recently discovered, through a work-related project, how much artwork artists had stowed in their homes, which led to the birth of the Art For Healing Foundation. Pinchuk and Blair decided that art should be on hospital walls, and in 2003 the first paintings arranged from private collections through the foundation appeared in Montreal health care institutions.

The hospitals now involved in the program are primarily in the Montreal region, among them the Montreal General Hospital, Montreal Children’s Hospital, the Jewish General Hospital and the Maimonides Geriatric Centre. There are now projects in the works at the Royal Victoria Hospital and Montreal Neurological Institute, as well.

Dr. Harvey Guyda, pediatrician-in-chief at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, says the art has a great effect on everyone at the hospital. “When I first came to the Children’s Hospital, everything was painted an institutional green, no colours and certainly no artwork.”

Once the art arrived, he says, staff, patients and their families found the difference it made to the surroundings exhilarating.

"You have children undergoing various treatments that can be painful and distressing," Dr. Guyda says. "There's a fair body of literature showing the environment can have what is called a 'healing environment effect.' The kids can be smiling even when they may be undergoing something painful."

The pictures in the Children's Hospital are in treatment rooms and corridors as well as the entranceways. There are lots of bright, colourful and cheerful pictures, many with animal subjects. Older children enjoy landscapes and abstracts.

Visual memories

For seniors in hospital, more traditional pictures are popular. "That's because traditional paintings are more accessible for these patients," says Sondra Goldman, art therapist at Maimonides Geriatric Centre. "There's some reference they can relate to. Older people weren't raised with modern art."

Karen Flam, director of Maimonides Geriatric Centre says, "80 per cent of people living here have some form of dementia or Alzheimer's. The minute we started to put up the artwork, the residents responded immediately. People who rarely speak told us they liked it. Some told us they didn't. You get either reaction. But the best thing was that people were always smiling. A smile from somebody who has dementia or Alzheimer's is a wonderful thing. When you deal with elderly and Alzheimer's people you have to find different ways to reach them, and art and music are the best."

Goldman says the effect on patients is huge.

"When a room or a hallway is completely blank, it's sterile and you're just looking at a wall. As soon as you put an image up on it, you are creating a window. I use images a lot for sensory stimulation. I get patients to describe what they see. Our visual memory is much deeper than our verbal memory."

She adds, that there's neurological research that shows the impact of colour on people's well-being.

"I've seen people who've been very stressed and anxious, and when they imagine themselves in a place they really loved, or remember what they've seen, their breathing becomes deeper and their heartbeat slows down," Goldman says.

According to Flam and Guyda, the art on the walls puts a smile on the faces of staff as well.

Says Flam, "Even the housekeeper was proud, because the area she cleaned was so much more beautiful."

The Art for Healing Foundation works by collecting work from artists, their estates or collectors, and then issuing tax receipts based on an evaluation. Pinchuk says that because artists often donate a number of pieces of work, the art is organized into galleries, whether it's in a corridor or a nook of the hospital. The area is then renamed after the artist.

As word about the projects gets around, the art just keeps on coming, too. Says Pinchuk, "There's an artist who just passed away last week whose family contacted us, who had 2,000 canvases, so we will start working with his estate. It's endless. People get so excited when they hear the gallery idea. They feel good the art is taken out of somebody's basement and up into a hospital ward."

Dr. Guyda says the art isn't just attractive — it conveys a message to patients and their families. "It makes you feel like you are in a place that cares."

That's something hospital green just doesn't do.

For more information

For more information on the Art Healing Foundation, please visit their website at www.artforhealingfoundation.org or by telephone at 514-846-3811