The Global Imperative to Articulate, Evaluate, and Implement the Arts and Culture as a Health Resource

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A growing body of evidence shows that arts interventions promote and sustain health and wellbeing among individuals, encourage community cohesion, and have therapeutic effects in clinical treatment. Nisha Sajnani of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab calls for a holistic approach to healthcare worldwide, highlighting the need for policymakers to sustainably integrate the arts into national healthcare systems, and ensure their efforts are built on large-scale, inclusive research as well as systemic support in the form of professional training and funding.

Towards a Holistic Understanding of Health

Across continents, public health systems are burdened by rising rates of anxiety, depression, chronic illness, and loneliness. Singapore is no exception. In this context, the arts—long celebrated for their intrinsic value, as well as cultural and economic contributions—are increasingly recognised for a vital additional role: promoting and sustaining health and wellbeing. From dancing to improve symptoms of Parkinson's disease, to singing in choirs to support those with chronic lung disease, arts-based interventions are proving to be low-risk, non-invasive, cost-effective, and meaningful complements to traditional biomedical treatments. Yet while interest is growing, the health value of the arts is still inconsistently articulated, unevenly measured, and inadequately implemented. This essay argues for the global imperative to examine the public health value of the arts through robust evaluation, culturally grounded approaches, and sustained cross-sector collaboration and investment.

Over time, the concept of health has evolved beyond the mere absence of disease to reflect a more holistic understanding of human wellbeing. In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) articulated this shift by defining health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Health today is seen as the ability to adapt, to find meaning, and to build resilience in the face of life's challenges. In this evolving vision, the arts have emerged as a resource that supports not only personal expression, but also connection, healing, and growth. Creative engagement offers people a way to express themselves, process emotions, and connect with others—a critical offering in an increasingly fast-paced, (mis)information-heavy and uncertain world. This recognition is leading to the integration of the arts into national and global health policy, and the incorporation of care and wellbeing in cultural agendas.

The term "Arts and Health" refers to an expanding ecosystem of practices that use arts, culture, and creative expression to support wellbeing across the lifecourse and in different settings. These can range from receptive arts engagement such as attending cultural events to active arts engagement such as participating in heritage crafts and interactive arts practices in schools, community, and cultural centres. It can also involve arts-based public health campaigns and residencies with artists and creative arts therapists employed in hospitals and clinics. This wide spectrum reveals how the arts operate

Figure 1. The making of "A Picture of Health@Bukit Batok" mural, co-created by Mural Lingo with residents of hospital-adopted rental housing block and staff of Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, as part of the hospital's Community Arts&Health programme, 2023. Image courtesy of Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

across a continuum of wellness and care to support individual and community wellbeing.

The Value of the Arts Across the Lifecourse

Globally, the evidence base is growing. Reviews of international research, including a landmark report published by WHO and population health studies led by the WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts and Health at University College London, have shown the power of the arts to support healthy development in children and young people. For example, research from large cohort studies in the United Kingdom and the United States shows that children and adolescents who regularly engage in arts activities—like reading for pleasure, music, drama, or dance—tend to have fewer behavioural problems, including lower levels of hyperactivity, inattention, and antisocial behavior. Arts engagement was also linked to healthier behaviours, such as reduced substance use and better diet, though effects on physical activity and social support were less consistent. Among young adults, increases in arts participation were associated with greater flourishing over time, particularly in the strengthening of social wellbeing and a sense of community connection—an important protective factor known to buffer against mental health challenges and promote resilience across the lifespan.

For adults, recreational arts activities have been associated with higher life satisfaction and wellbeing. Large-scale studies in the UK have shown that both frequent arts participation (like making art or music) and cultural attendance (like going to concerts or museums) are linked to better mental health and life satisfaction in adults—even after accounting for demographic and health factors. Arts partici-

"Integrating the arts into healthcare can boost wellbeing, strengthen communities, and transform treatment—if supported by research, training, and funding."

pation, in particular, was associated with stronger coping skills for everyday mental health challenges, likely because it activates key emotional regulation strategies such as distraction, emotional processing, and self-esteem building. Researchers also found that both in-person and virtual arts activities, like choir singing, helped people regulate emotions—though in-person activities were slightly more effective. Importantly, people with depression benefited from arts engagement just as much as those without, helping explain why arts-based interventions can be effective for improving mental health.

Among older adults, arts participation is linked to cognitive stimulation, reduced depression, and even lower risk of dementia. For example, a recent study using data from the US Health and Retirement Study found that older adults who engaged in receptive arts activities at least once a month were more likely to experience healthier aging over the next four years. This included better mental and physical health, greater social connection, and lower risk of chronic conditions. These findings were consistent with those from the Busselton Healthy Ageing Study in Western Australia, which showed that older adults who regularly engaged in recreational arts activities such as attending or participating in visual arts, crafts, and music, or volunteering with arts organisations on average once per week reported significantly higher mental well-being scores compared to those who did not participate, even after controlling for factors like age, gender, education, income, and physical health. Finally, a study of over 1,000 adults aged 50+ in Singapore found that both attending and participating in arts activities were linked to better wellbeing. Those who attended arts events reported higher quality of life and a stronger sense of belonging, while active participants showed even greater benefits, including improved health, meaning, and spiritual wellbeing.

Together, findings from recent studies consistently show that both receptive and active participation in the arts are associated with better mental health, enhanced resilience, and stronger social ties—supporting the arts as a potential population-level strategy for healthy development and improved quality of life as we get older, provided opportunities are made accessible from birth to old age.

Advancing Research and Infrastructure for Creative Health

Despite the growing evidence, there are still significant challenges to integrating the arts into health systems. One of the main issues is the lack of consistent definitions. Terms like "arts," "culture,"

Figure 2. Residents from Villa Francis Home for the Aged participating in a creative movement pilot "Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing", a collaboration between Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd and the National Arts Council, 2018. Image courtesy of Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd, Singapore.

"arts engagement," or "arts participation" can mean different things across studies, making it difficult to synthesise findings. Many studies also fail to recognise informal or culturally specific practices, leaving gaps in understanding and excluding valuable knowledge.

Methodologically, much of the research remains small-scale or cross-sectional. There is a need for more longitudinal studies, more randomised trials, and an appreciation for an unbiased and nuanced approach to understanding the sustained and specific effects of arts interventions. Moreover, the majority of research has focused on mental health and could be further expanded to examine the impact of the arts on chronic disease, rehabilitation, and prevention. Understanding how arts interventions actually work—their mechanisms of change—also remains under-explored. While people may feel better after participating in an arts activity, the pathways through which this occurs need greater clarity.

To evaluate the true value of arts interventions, we also need to expand capacity to make use of the tools that exist and develop better metrics. Quantitative measures—such as changes in health status, healthcare usage, or economic impact—are essential for identifying trends, demonstrating scale, and informing policy. However, they are insufficient on their own. Qualitative approaches like storytelling, journaling, and arts-based research methods can help capture the nuance, emotional depth, and contextual factors that shape lived experience. When combined, these approaches enable a more comprehensive understanding—where numbers offer rigour and reach, stories reveal meaning and perspective, and images, performances, and films capture attention, inspire imagination, and motivate action.

Equity is another key concern. Much of the existing research comes from high-income countries. Marginalised groups—including migrants, people with disabilities, and low-income communities—

Figure 3. Participants from SPD explore *Space Sculpture No. 1* by Tan Teng-Kee during a volunteer-led tour at National Gallery Singapore, 2023. Image courtesy of National Gallery Singapore, Community & Access.

are often under-represented. Culturally grounded, locally relevant, and co-produced approaches that include people with lived experience are needed to ensure the field is inclusive and globally applicable. The arts are rooted in cultural identity and tradition; failing to reflect this in research risks reinforcing inequality.

On a systemic level, implementation barriers remain significant. The arts are often siloed from health policy. There is a need for workforce training to equip artists and cultural leaders to understand and articulate their role as partners in public health. The pathways to professional recognition for trained arts facilitators and arts therapists are uneven, and a lack of funding to support arts and health programs make it harder to grow and sustain impactful programmes. Meanwhile, economic analyses show that the annual health savings and productivity gains from creative engagement are significant, with a recent report from the UK Department for Media, Culture, and Sport indicating the savings from increased productivity and reduced visits to general practitioners (GPs) to be an estimated £18 billion per annum, underscoring the potential return on investment.

The Cultural Future of Health

Despite these obstacles, momentum is building. Collaborations between cultural and health organisations are beginning to inform new policies and frameworks. Cities and countries are taking steps to embed the arts in public health strategies, recognising their role in prevention, care, and community resilience. For example, social prescribing—a model that connects individuals to non-clinical, community-based activities such as arts, cultural programmes, and nature-based

initiatives—has emerged as a critical tool for addressing social determinants of health, loneliness, mental health challenges, and social inclusion. It focuses on leveraging existing community resources to support recovery, reduce symptoms, and foster meaningful social connections. In Singapore, this approach is gaining momentum with the designation of SingHealth Community Hospitals as the world's first WHO Collaborating Centre for Social Prescribing. This milestone recognises the growing role of arts, culture, and nature in promoting overall health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, and reflects a broader commitment to integrating community engagement into the continuum of care.

Toolkits and resources are beginning to emerge, offering guidance on identifying, designing, implementing, and evaluating arts and health programmes. For example, the Arts and Health Singapore Repository actively documents the state of arts and health field in Singapore, and the Centre for Music and Health within the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YST) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has been developing an Arts and Health Evaluation Toolkit (AHET) to provide practical frameworks and outcome-focused tools to help practitioners assess the impact of arts and cultural activities on health, wellbeing, and social connection.

To move forward, a globally coordinated approach is needed. A shared framework should promote consistent definitions, map current cultural assets and evidence, develop culturally responsive, validated, and standardised measures, and support interdisciplinary research and training. This includes public awareness campaigns that position the arts as a health behaviour, investment in professional development and post-graduate training for artists and health professionals including the creative arts therapies, and infrastructure that supports both artistic and scientific integrity. Importantly, it also means ensuring recognition, job security, and new employment opportunities in this emerging area of creative health where artists and creative arts therapists can pursue fairly compensated work in healthcare, education, and community settings, enabling the cultural sector to play a greater role in advancing public health.

The arts are not a luxury or an afterthought. They are how communities process change, express identity, and build connection. Around the world, people sing, draw, and dance not because they are told to—but because these acts help them heal, adapt, and thrive. The task before us is not to invent a new role for the arts in health, but to recognise and support what communities have always known: that creativity is essential to survival and flourishing. In an era marked by disconnection and digital acceleration, the arts offer something vital—presence, reflection, and humanity.

By bringing the arts into the centre of health policy and practice, we shift from intuition to evidence, from anecdote to infrastructure. We reimagine health not only through treatment, but also through meaning. Singapore, with its deep cultural diversity, growing leadership in arts and health, and strong systems for policy coordination, has the opportunity to be at the forefront of this movement—shaping a future where wellbeing is cultural, communal, and creative. □

About the Author

Professor Nisha Sajnani is Director of the NYU Steinhardt Graduate Program in Drama Therapy and Co-founding Co-Director of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab, established in partnership with the World Health Organization to measurably improve lives through the arts. Through the Lab, she consults with city and country governments, cultural institutions, and academic centres, to map and mobilise the arts as a health resource. Professor Sajnani has been published widely and leads the Jameel Arts & Health Lab–Lancet Global Series on the Health Benefits of the Arts, in collaboration with Dr. Nils Fietje at the WHO Regional Office for Europe. An award-winning author, educator, and advocate, her body of work explores the unique ways in which aesthetic experience can inspire equity and care in service of public and planetary health.

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