Visual art in cancer advocacy in the WHO European Region: a multinational artistic exhibition for the European Week Against Cancer

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ABSTRACT:

The visual arts have been trending in medical education in recent years. Medical students were therefore given an opportunity to showcase their artistic talents in an art exhibition at the Medical Museum at the University of Crete, Greece, as part of the European Week Against Cancer (EWAC) 2019. This brief communication presents the event, its successes and lessons learned for future exhibitions, including those anticipated for EWAC 2020. The exhibition aimed to combine artistic expression with the promotion of cancer awareness, and this communication also takes the opportunity to discuss the importance of such events in cancer advocacy, both for those attending the event and the students submitting the artwork. Overall, such events not only promote awareness but also encourage creativity and improve communication skills in medical students and should therefore be further encouraged both by education faculties and in all types of public health advocacy.

Keywords: CANCER, ART, EXHIBITION, STUDENTS, ADVOCACY

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of the visual arts in health, both in terms of patient involvement and general population well-being, are reasonably established (I). However, the visual arts have also been trending in medical education in recent years. An increasing number of medical schools have integrated visual arts in preclinical or clinical teaching with the rationale of a) enhancing both observation and communication skills, b) diversifying skills and knowledge of future doctors and c) giving opportunities for self-resilience through art and culture (1, 2). Medical students¹ were therefore given an opportunity to showcase their artistic talents in an art exhibition as part of the European Week Against Cancer (EWAC), between May 24 and May 29 2019. This brief communication aims to present the event, its successes and lessons learned for future exhibitions as well as its links to cancer advocacy.

¹ One participating student was studying pharmacy

THE MEDICAL STUDENT ARTISTIC EXHIBITION AS PART OF THE EWAC

The EWAC is an initiative endorsed by the Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL), which organizes various activities including workshops and conferences throughout the week (3). The ECL network of youth ambassadors is also encouraged to organize EWAC initiatives with support from the ECL in terms of promotion and funding (following a grant application procedure) (3, 4). As a ECL youth ambassador and a medical student coordinator of an arts group (authors CT and KTV respectively) we organized the art exhibition, with support from the ECL and the Medical Museum of the University of Crete (Heraklion, Greece), who kindly granted permission to host the event and provide logistical assistance.

The subsequent call to medical students for participation was communicated via email and social media. We invited
student groups and students with whom we had collaborated with on art-related projects in the past. In addition, we carried out searches using both Google and popular social media sites (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) with the keywords (medical students, (visual) art, society) to identify other potential suitable contacts. The call was communicated in English, Greek, Ukrainian and Russian and we asked those who responded to us to spread the call in their native languages where relevant.

The call was widesoping; it asked for art work simply connected to the theme of cancer, with any form of visual art welcome, provided that it could be submitted online and did not violate confidentiality or copyright standards. The call also asked that participants provide a brief text paragraph accompanying their artwork elaborating on its connection to the EWAC to stimulate the interest of and trigger discussion among their future audience, although this was not obligatory. Students were also asked to submit their full name, affiliation, and a title for their artwork, along with granting the organizers the right to display their work at the EWAC 2019 art exhibition.

In total we received 24 artworks, all of which were deemed suitable for presentation (both in terms of image quality and no confidentiality or copyright infringements). All artworks were received in an electronic format with the exception of one local student who provided the original piece. The participating students were from Bulgaria, Greece, Tunisia and Ukraine. Diversity appeared to be a key feature of the exhibition, not only based on the diverse background of the participants but due to the various aspects of cancer depicted and the multiple techniques used. The artworks ranged from realistic pictures in hospital settings to symbolic depictions of clocks and surrealist portraits presenting a chemotherapy course as a set of colours. A variety of materials were used; more traditional acrylic, oil, watercolour and pastel artworks were accompanied by modern graphics and virtual painting modalities. For the purpose of this short communication we present three of these artworks and their accompanying descriptions (see Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)\(^2\), as these artists kindly gave their consent for us to use them in this context.

During the event all artwork was displayed using a projector and a programmed PowerPoint presentation. Each artwork, along with any text description, was presented for 30 seconds in turn. The full presentation ran in loop during the museum opening hours (9.00–14.00), even at times when there were no personnel around, to increase the visibility of the artworks. The original artwork that was provided was displayed next to the projector screen and included in the PowerPoint presentation.

The Medical Museum spread the word about the exhibition and it was also announced in university mail lists and in local media channels to invite both the academic community and the local general public to diversify the audience. Around 100 people visited the exhibition, and feedback, primarily given in person at the exhibition but also in provided feedback forms, was overwhelmingly positive.

### SUCCESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EVENT

This was the first time such an exhibition was organized as part of the EWAC. The event was held with minimal infrastructure required and with very limited costs. The entire exhibition was hosted using basic electronic equipment (computer, projector and presentation software) and the use of scanned copies of artwork projected for viewing avoided expensive transportation or printing costs of the artworks, which served also to lower the carbon footprint of the event. In addition, the virtual format of the exhibition means that the artwork can easily been made available at a later date, whether it be for a future event, an arts class, or as part of a permanent online depository, which could be open access or restricted to faculty

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\(^2\) These artworks along with several others in the exhibition can be found on the website of the European Student Think Tank: [http://www.esthinktank.com/paintings-for-world-cancer-day](http://www.esthinktank.com/paintings-for-world-cancer-day).
members, as preferred. It is worth mentioning, however, that the exhibition would benefit from the use of additional projectors or the use of screens. We hope to expand in this area for EWAC 2020 to be able to give each artwork the display time it is worthy of.

The exhibition itself brought together a wide range of people, from faculty members and physicians to students, cancer patients and the general public. Based on comments received at the event, we noted that physicians and patients were able to relate to familiar objects or concepts and elaborate on personal experience and future considerations. Many attendees commented on the diverse styles and interpretations of the fight against cancer. The positive visitor feedback was echoed by the ECL, to whom the event was reported, and we were encouraged to repeat the event as part of EWAC 2020, which we intend to do.
A collaborative network was established as part of the event, bringing together the individual participating students and a few of their associated groups including the Art and Painting club of the Bukovinian State Medical University (Ukraine) and the Innovamed Students Association (Tunisia). This network was formed primarily for easing the coordination of EWAC 2020 and communicating other relevant future events. Indeed, most of the network later submitted their artwork (both the same and novel) to a similar exhibition as part of Stem Cell Week in November 2019, and responded to a relevant call from the European Student Think Tank as part of World Cancer Day organized by the author (CT).

We collected 24 different artworks for the event, which we feel was a sufficient number for a first exhibition. One thing that should be considered for the future is that many potential students did not take part (33 students had initially confirmed their participation and we assume many more with the ability to take part did not reach out to us), and several those that did were somewhat hesitant, due to the timing of the exhibition, which fell shortly before the exam period in June. The intense level of studying required for these exams, across all countries, may have discouraged students who wish to engage in such extracurricular activities. In general, we feel that universities should make more of an effort to include art as a valid component of medical studies just as lectures, presentations and exams are. Implementing visual arts as part of the general curriculum would evidently encourage students to take part in such initiatives. However, to encourage hesitant students to participate in the event for 2019 we simply took time to talk to them, and it should also be noted that some of the students did indeed receive some academic merit for their participation based on a certificate provided by the ECL. To address the issue of time constraints on a practical level for the exhibition planned for EWAC 2020 we need more forward planning with increased submission times. We also hope to reach more arts societies associated with medical schools with our call for participation and thereby increase the number of received artworks. Furthermore, while we did not exclude the participation of other students in EWAC 2019, our target participants were medical students. For EWAC 2020 we wish to expand our call to all health-related students including dentists, pharmacists and biologists, whose viewpoints and knowledge-base on cancer are only likely to improve the diversity of our artworks.

One of the primary aspects to address for EWAC 2020 is increasing the number of visitors to the exhibition. The estimated 100 people attending the event was acceptable for a first exhibition, but we aim to substantially expand the scale of attendees for EWAC 2020. Higher coverage from local media, more invitations to local schools and education institutions, synergies with more organizations and expansion of the content of the exhibition to include literature (poetry and fiction) or music are some of the options we are currently considering. Additionally, or alternatively, given the electronic nature of the artworks, we are considering publishing the artworks on the European Student Think Tank website and perhaps reaching out to other more patient orientated web sites for their involvement, such as that of the ECL. Furthermore, the visibility of the event could also be increased via live streaming on social media and specialized channels, such as internetmedicinc.com, where a collaboration has already been established. In this case however, copyright becomes an issue and we need to consult with legal counsellors at participating institutions.

A final issue to be addressed for EWAC 2020 is how we assess the success of the event. Feedback forms were available for the 2019 event, but the majority of visitors preferred to talk to us rather than fill out a physical form, and so any data collected was of insufficient quantity to proceed with any analysis. We are planning more detailed documentation of the EWAC artistic exhibition 2020, by collecting feedback from both attendees and participants more vigorously. We intend to publish the results in due time.

THE ROLE OF ART IN CANCER ADVOCACY

The above-described event aimed to combine artistic expression with the promotion of cancer awareness. It also highlighted the potential role of artistically minded medical students in cancer advocacy. Cancer advocacy in general involves working to improve the lives of those with cancer. This can be through a wide range of activities, from public awareness raising to addressing policy-makers and stakeholders. Art matters in advocacy because it is a powerful means of communication. Visual art has particular value, as it is globally understandable and can spread multiple messages; each person’s interpretation is based on their own experience and knowledge. Art also can have the power to influence emotions and to move people – from the general public to decision-makers – but especially those who can relate to the topic on a personal level. Almost everyone has experienced the loss of someone they know as a result of cancer, whether it be a close family member or someone from their social circle, so
almost everyone can relate to the content of the art. This experience can have varying positive impacts on the audience, from getting to know or refreshing basic concepts of cancer prevention and care, to motivating an individual to arrange a screening test and reminding practitioners to be more empathetic towards patients in their busy clinical routine. Art can also bring back painful memories, but the benefits can be seen as outweighing these negative experiences (1, 2). The presence of organizers or personnel at an event to chat to visitors could be advantageous in this regard.

Art exhibitions led and created by students can also have a positive effect on the participating students themselves. It can allow them to show compassion and solidarity towards cancer patients and those directly affected by cancer, regardless of their study level. Importantly, such initiatives can also substantially enhance their scientific communication skills (1, 5). For example, many of our students incorporated the somewhat complex information that they are studying – from lymph node anatomy to imaging techniques – into their artworks. The ability to translate heavy scientific material into an enjoyable artwork and then to accompany the piece with a simple explanation accessible by the general public is a clear skill that is likely to heavily benefit both the future practitioner and their patient (6). It is well known that the inability of practitioners to provide patients with a clear understanding of their disease, possible complications and treatment is a considerable source of burden on health systems (7). It has also been estimated that if everyone had a basic understanding of cancer prevention the cancer-related burden could be decreased by half (4). Those students that develop adept communication skills are likely to be those that spend time and make the effort to relay information in an accessible manner to patients (8, 9). The first step to improve the use of art in cancer advocacy, or advocacy for any other disease for that matter, is support. If educational institutions embrace such initiatives and provide their students the chance to get involved, their creativity will flourish. Medical students would then be taught to see themselves not only as practitioners limited by guidelines and lawsuits but also as communicators of science, using their creativity to spread awareness, prevent disease and empathize with their patients (10). Future study into the benefits of enhancing the communication skills of medical students through art is required to allow universities to make this approach more mainstream.

CONCLUSION

The EWAC art exhibition provided a floor for medical students to create and display their own artwork depicting cancer. The electronic nature of the exhibition provided an easily repeatable platform and can promote the visibility of the artworks. The positive feedback we received is driving us to repeat an expanded version of the event for 2020. Such events not only promote cancer awareness but also encourage creativity in medical students and enhance their perception of themselves as communicators of science. Such a viewpoint is likely to greatly benefit practitioner-to-patient communication and should be encouraged both by education faculties and in all types of public health advocacy.

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Conflict of interests:

None declared.

Disclaimer:

The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.

REFERENCES


3 All references were accessed 20 March 2020.


