Conference Report

Art and the NHS

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Each year more people pass through the doors of St Thomas's Hospital than through the Tate Gallery—a thought provoking comment, and one of many made at a recent meeting on art and the NHS, organised by the DHSS and held at the King's Fund Centre. The impetus came from a seminar held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts last year, where one of the topics was art in hospitals. This stimulated so much discussion that the DHSS was moved to commission Peter Coles to look at art in NHS buildings on a national scale, and his findings provided the basis for the current meeting. There was passionate support for the arts, a plea to "stop regarding art as a frill and accept its central role in improving the visual and social environment of our hospitals," illustrations of specific art projects, and a dash of practical advice.

No one disagreed with the basic premise that it is desirable to make our hospitals "less awesome and drab," nor the scathing description of postwar architecture. The major role of the hospital in public life was discussed: it was even suggested that it might be the "twentieth century equivalent of the cathedral." Professor John Davies reminded us that major life events—birth, sickness, and death (not to mention the less dramatic burden of chronic ill health and disability)—take place within its walls. Hospitals should therefore seek to improve the quality of life for both patients and staff by creating an atmosphere of health and optimism rather than sterile practicality. The idea that quality of life should be subjected to some form of cost effective audit was thankfully squashed before it got off the ground.

So what has been done so far? Over 65 hospitals in Britain set aside money to buy works of art and many obtain paintings on loan from local authorities. There was broad agreement that original and contemporary paintings were more desirable than hackneyed reproductions of old masters. A few hospitals employ artists as permanent members of staff to broaden the scope of art beyond the visual to include the performing arts, and to stimulate patient and staff participation in art projects. SHAPE was set up in 1976 to promote arts activities for the disabled, elderly, and mentally handicapped.

Progress on the arts in hospitals is a patchy affair, but an idea of what can be achieved was given by speakers describing individual hospital projects. Glynn Purland (senior administrator, Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham) showed some illuminating before and after slides and convinced his audience that miles of corridor and characterless spaces can be given a personality by imaginative decoration. On a practical note he mentioned that "art" is a "fabric protector" because it inhibits people from barging into walls. Peter Senior (director and founder of the Manchester Hospitals Art Project) showed how the hospital environment in his area has been transformed by the arts team. From puppet shows to chamber music, macramé

Detail from mural at Prestwich Hospital.

to murals, one is left with a vivid impression that the team has reached artistic parts that no one else has ever approached.

Firing the imagination and finding the cash

Several clear messages emerged from the meeting. Firstly, any art project must be supervised by an interested administrator or doctor. Professional advice is essential, although members of staff, and patients, should have a say in the choice of work in their department or ward. Local art schools can provide valuable expertise, facilities, and skilled advice. Financial support is obviously necessary, and hospital charities, together with special trustee and endowment funds, can help. Neither the Arts Council nor the local health authorities have money to spare but the limiting factor is more likely to be lack of local imagination and enthusiasm than lack of cash. Finally artists and architects should cooperate closely at the germinal stage of any new development. It was interesting to hear that in some countries 1% or more of the total budget for a new hospital building is set aside for art works.

Anyone who is interested in this topic must read the recent DHSS report by Peter Coles, which sets out existing schemes and gives details of the various funding bodies. Someone quoted a nineteenth century philistine who said that "art is no more than an amusement of the idle rich"—arguably a minority opinion, and we have come a long way since then . . . but there is a lot further to go.