

Case studies: How have culture and creativity been supporting people in health, care and other institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Project: Singing Medicine & Singing Pathways

Organisation: Ex Cathedra

Region: West Midlands

Designed for: Children in hospital

“...this is absolutely amazing! Really made us smile during this difficult time! — had a little boogie to the video especially when you sang happy birthday! What you do is absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much to all of you who were involved in creating such a special video for my baby —! Thank you again x”



Image credit: Ex Cathedra

Introduction

Ex Cathedra: a singing charity and leading UK choir celebrating its 50th year. We believe that everyone should be able to experience the remarkable physical, mental and emotional health benefits of singing. The ***Singing Medicine*** team at Birmingham Children’s Hospital (BCH), bring smiles, laughter, and the many wellbeing benefits and special qualities of singing-play to 0-18 year-olds. Many children we reach are extremely unwell and in terrible pain – some may need treatment for years, and some sadly may never go home.

Singing Pathways at Solihull Hospital (soon to be Heartlands) supports recovery for stroke and dementia patients.

All our beneficiaries look forward to seeing our team of Vocal Tutors each week, so when we couldn’t make ‘in-person’ visits, we quickly developed digital sessions so that all patients could still access our projects [for free] in hospitals, in care homes, or anywhere in the world where people are shielding or are isolated.

We also now make digital ***Singing Postcards*** for individual children at BCH; to produce these c.4 minute personal films we communicate with the ward staff, including the play workers - they inform us who would benefit from additional intervention with enough [confidential] information to ensure that we can make the most appropriate, accessible, engaging and interactive film as possible for each child - we are looking to produce the same for our adult patients in the very near future.

We had already formed a partnership with BCH Chaplaincy multi-faith team to produce what is believed to be, [the world's first hospital-wide children and young people's virtual patient choir](#), called the Lifting Spirits Choir (released in June 2020, but luckily filmed just before lockdown).

We continue in partnership to plan the next virtual choir film...

Funders

Birmingham Children's Hospital has funded us - in part, up until March 2020, at which point they were no longer able to fund us because of the impact of Covid upon them. We do however have support from many trusts - including major donations from the Oak Foundation, Froebel Trust, and Masonic Charitable Foundation – for which we are eternally grateful.

Partners

Birmingham Children's Hospital staff and multi-faith Chaplaincy Team, Solihull Hospital Stroke Unit (soon to be Heartlands in Birmingham).

Who is it for?

Singing Medicine is delivered by Ex Cathedra Vocal Tutors to inpatients at Birmingham Children's Hospital who suffer from varied long-term conditions – we reach children and young people (0-18) on wards in Waterfall House, Ocean ward, Burns, Neonatal, Dialysis, wards 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, Paediatric Intensive Care Unit and children in the High Dependency Unit and Patient Assessment (as well as outpatient clinics). Singing Medicine activity is developed to meet the needs of each child, so for children in isolation bays or unable to get out of bed, bedside sessions take place and sometimes activities will be used whilst a clinical procedure is being carried out - so the child can engage with Singing Medicine, which in turn can aid distraction from procedures and provide much needed respite for parents and carers. For children who are more able, sessions take place in communal areas and encourage children to get out of their hospital beds, where appropriate, and sing and play together when it is safe to do so.

Singing Pathways is delivered by Ex Cathedra's Vocal Tutors, to inpatients at Solihull Hospital (soon to be Heartlands) who have recently suffered a stroke and/or have dementia, our sessions:

- Bring the well-being benefits of singing; staff report that it prevents patients from sinking into a depression
- Aids communication - staff report how patients who cannot speak have their speech "unlocked" for about 45 minutes after a session
- Enable patients to make decisions; patients report how it makes them feel "alive"
- (Where appropriate) support and encourage movement
- (Depending on request and need) provide an environment that is calming, distracting or stimulating
- Enable a positive supportive activity between family members and patients
- Enable hospital staff to develop a deeper understanding of the benefits of singing.

Are these people you have worked with before, or new participants?

Both

Where is it happening?

Birmingham, and the West Midlands mainly – but in some cases, children could be referred to Birmingham Children's Hospital from all over the UK.

For how long has it been happening?

Singing Medicine was created especially for Birmingham Children's Hospital and since 2004 we have delivered circa 40,000 sessions. We then developed *Singing Pathways* in 2013 from our learning of *Singing Medicine*; we were then asked by Birmingham Women's Hospital to develop a Singing project for brand new mothers and babies, now successfully delivered for 4 years. All projects are ongoing and it is our intention to continue as long as funding allows – in fact, we would love to grow and expand to other hospitals in the future.

What were/are the main outputs?

Singing Medicine is a weekly online event every Friday on Facebook Live (Vocal Tutors film from their own homes) and we have created and produced over 150 short interactive films on our designated YouTube channel.

Four c.25+ minute sessions for Singing Pathways are available online, with more currently being filmed and edited as this goes to print [October 2020].

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

We aim to make a difference to patients; special moments include children speaking for the first time following a coma, or smiling for the first time in weeks.

Research has shown that singing releases the body's natural opioids and hormones associated with wellbeing such as oxytocin, and reduces cortisol (stress), it stimulates the brain and the deeper breathing required connects people to their core. Singing also helps reduce anxiety, can distract the mind, avoiding over-worrying or over-thinking, can enable you to feel happier, more relaxed and at peace, as these significant benefits play a central role in our psychological health too.

Ex Cathedra's singing-play repertoire is written by its own team for specific wellbeing and play purposes, and to enable all children and adolescents, whatever their capabilities, illness, situation, language, background, and needs, to play. Enabling decision-making and children being at the centre of the play are key aspects of the repertoire and sessions. The team are responsive to individual needs and requests whether from child, family or staff member – doctor, physio or nurse.

Often it is assumed we only work with children who can interact with us. However, we have had many sessions where we have sung with children who are unable to visually respond, but where the singing has triggered a response for a family or staff member, allowing them to release their emotions. This extension of the work (i.e. not simply being for the patient) is very valuable and welcomed by the team, as a patients' wellbeing is obviously affected by the wellbeing of those around them, whether family or medical staff. Our singing sessions also help hospital staff to distract their patients whilst undergoing difficult treatment.

When we were attending the wards physically, we introduced the discussion of staff awareness into our morning and afternoon set up and evaluation meetings. This has led to the team being more aware of their practice on the wards alongside staff and as a result, staff are being more forthcoming in telling the team what has been a positive aspect or impact on children, families, and themselves. As a result, we added a new section to the reporting and evaluation sheets, 'reported reduction of perception of pain'. This in turn means the team is more confident and proactive in offering support, so team members and staff are more often working together to improve wellbeing, with Singing Medicine supporting clinical activities and outcomes – this all now takes place virtually.

Have you adapted existing work to make this happen? If so, how?

Singing Pathways [for stroke and dementia patients] - uses singing and actions to bypass speech and movement blockages, as well as facilitating communication otherwise lost to aphasia (it is not unusual for a patient to sing a sentence or their name, even though they cannot actually speak it).

Singing Medicine aims to improve the well-being of children in hospital through positive and interactive songs and singing games, that are completely inclusive with regards to ages, capabilities, clinical needs, language and background, vocal skills and musicianship, are playful and fun or soothing and calming – depending on what is appropriate and requested.

When lockdown started we were absolutely determined to continue to keep our hospital community together, feeling purposeful and contributing to their wellbeing through singing. All these activities have been adapted to work online since Covid.

Every Friday, Singing Medicine Vocal Tutors use a vast range of interactive songs and singing games – many of which have been composed by the team - encouraging participation through singing, play/activity-based choice and decision-making, via our new digital platforms (noted in section 26).

The team are currently busy making more interactive sessions for Singing Pathways, as well as planning for potential Singing Postcards (already noted in section 6).

Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics¹?

Our beneficiaries are from all walks of life, diverse cultures, ethnicities and faiths, many may come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Birmingham is one of the most deprived areas in the UK).

Our creative practitioners are freelance professionals (who are all Ex Cathedra choir members), mainly females of a mixed age-range, with a variety of different religions and beliefs.

Evaluation & Feedback

Evaluation of pre-covid work is described under “Further Information” below. See the question below for more recent feedback.

What is your own impression of how it has worked? What have been the challenges and successes for you?

All our online work has been extremely successful, but possibly our biggest success has been the new **Singing Postcards** strand of our work, mentioned above:

“Oh Gemma this is absolutely amazing! Really made us smile during this difficult time! — had a little boogie to the video especially when you sang happy birthday!

What you do is absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much to all of you who were involved in creating such a special video for my baby —!

Thank you again x” (Mother of Singing Postcards recipient)

We also recently made a singing film for — in intensive care, who was due to have life support removed, we made the film to aid the family, who were memory-making.

Not being able to physically be there ‘in-person’ has been hard on the Vocal Tutors, as well as our beneficiaries.

¹Protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation (Equalities Act 2010).

The biggest challenge we face (and always have the possibility of facing) is singing with children who are at end of life, and also at funerals and memorials.

For example, the team sang on three occasions for a family in neo-natal and gave them a Singing Bonds CD. Sadly, the baby passed away and the team sang at her funeral because two of the songs had become very meaningful and special to them.

Are you reaching more people/fewer people/different people?

All children and adults everywhere, no matter how isolated, can now access our work [for free] – seeing as our Facebook sessions for **Singing Medicine** are streamed live each Friday, we do have evidence of new viewers who are accessing our work, mainly parents/carers at home with young children – as well as some new patients on the wards of course; but nothing beats the personal touch, so we look forward to when we can visit all the wards again in person.

We are also reaching new audiences with our Singing Medicine teddy bear, named Noah. He is part of the very significant 'Everything to Everybody' project – which unites the Shakespeare archive with the George Dawson Collection. The project will open up the Library of Birmingham Shakespeare Collection to the whole of Birmingham. *Noah will take his favourite book to the hospital because he is a bit worried about being admitted...* there is a First Folio in the Library of Birmingham and the plan is, that the book Noah takes to the hospital will be the 'First Folio' (complete with security of course). When Noah is at Birmingham Children's Hospital, children's author Rhian Ivory will read stories and we will do singing activities, then she will write a story all about Noah's visit to hospital and everyone he met...

What new skills have you or your colleagues had to develop to deliver this work?

Filming at home in the very beginning was a challenge; our Vocal Tutors had to quickly acquire new skills - recording your own part into a mobile phone, on your own at home, is a very different experience to singing together in the same room at the hospitals. When restrictions eased, Vocal Tutors met in each other's gardens and since then, have been able to access professional studios to safely film their work accurately and confidently.

What would you say has made this project possible?

The vision, commitment and dedication of our Director of Education (Rebecca Ledgard) and her team of Vocal Tutors, who all go the extra mile to make each patient feel special and important – but also the determination to 'find a way around the problem' and become innovative in trialling new approaches (many of the team had never filmed their own performances before – so there were a lot of new skills to be learned).

We employed the services of a fabulous videographer, who began guiding the team on successful filming – but always bearing in mind that this was a new and somewhat scary process, so the ability to laugh with each other was crucial – especially when things went wrong!

The understanding and flexibility of some of our wonderful funders to allow us to utilise their funds in this way, has also been invaluable to the ongoing success of these projects.

What would have made it easier?

Being a lot more tech-savvy, but out of adversity, comes creativity – and we have all learned such a lot of new skills – technical filming and digital uploading to name but a few!

Further information

<https://excathedra.co.uk/education-participation/singing-medicine/>

Singing Medicine YouTube page: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB9j6HKIKciq3_Tanhzvngk

Singing Medicine Facebook Live: <https://m.facebook.com/SingingMedicine/>

Lifting Spirits Children's Hospital Choir: https://youtu.be/l_56CxtAsXE

<https://excathedra.co.uk/education-participation/singing-pathways/>

PATHWAYS YouTube page:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUFnMlqb-FnPrdDDtipq34g>

Singing Medicine was awarded Outstanding Contribution to the Field of Arts in Health by Royal Society for Public Health, 2011.

We are also part of Birmingham Music Education Partnership (BMEP) - where music inclusion and special needs is an ongoing agenda item. In this group we share our learning together. Our [Singing Medicine Lifting Spirits Choir film](#) was shown at the Birmingham Music Service Gala concert this year – a first for them in having a performance by hospital children.

"This is singularly the best thing we can do for our patients"
Solihull Hospital consultant on Singing Pathways.

Doctors increasingly refer patients to us for wellbeing:

"My patient is very down. I've told her she must do some Singing Medicine today".

Nurses increasingly request our support with aspects of the care they provide:

"My patient's heart rate needs increasing to increase their oxygen saturation rate, please will you do some stimulating singing play with them". "My patient was in a lot of pain. I offered them pain relief medication or Singing Medicine and they chose Singing Medicine and for the rest of the afternoon, they did not require pain relief meds."

One session, the team worked with a nurse to incorporate blowing into a singing game, so she could do some tests. In another, they were called urgently to a bedside - [J] was in a lot of distress and was being physically restrained by Carer and Senior Nurse; [J] had global developmental delay, could not speak, was physically uncomfortable and very angry. The Singing Medicine team sang question and answer singing games with his name and instructions for 30 minutes, eventually he laid down, breathed a sigh of relief, closed his eyes and slept. *"That was nothing short of miraculous!"* Nurse.

Planning, reporting, recording and evaluation are crucial to sessions. The team reflect on the feedback they actively seek from staff, families and patients in order to develop the most appropriate, supportive and enjoyable singing-sessions they can. We must be highly sensitive to patient needs, capabilities and emotions, as well as that of the family. We must be highly tuned into how we can be supportive and helpful to staff rather than in the way. E.g. physiotherapist was at bedside with [Y] in paediatric intensive care removing fluid from the child's lungs with a suction pipe down the patient's throat. She asked us to sing soothing songs using a puppet to distract the patient from this highly unpleasant and uncomfortable procedure. We were asked to go to an isolation room (protective infection control) to see if we could lift the patient's spirits. [T] had been in isolation for weeks and was very downcast. We made singing games about his toy dinosaurs - the parent was very vocal in her thanks of how we had lifted their spirits and distracted them.

We undertake case studies. In 2019, Dr C Blackburn, Birmingham City University undertook a [research project on Singing Medicine](#), which found that

“...participating in Singing Medicine provides health, wellbeing and emotional benefits for children, their families and the NHS professionals working in the hospital. It contributes to children’s learning and development (including neurodevelopment), family relationships and experiences of their hospital stay, provides a distraction from pain and discomfort, and provides positive memories for families if the worst happens and children do not recover.”

Ex Cathedra’s singing-play repertoire is written by its own team for specific wellbeing and play purposes, and to enable all children and adolescents, whatever their capabilities, illness, situation, language, background, and needs, to play. Enabling decision-making and children being at the centre of the play are key aspects of the repertoire and sessions. The team are responsive to individual needs and requests whether from child, family or staff member – doctor, physio or nurse.

Further feedback:

“She’s so chilled from that. And her heart rate calmed right down. Look at the monitor! It happened right when you were singing.” (Mum)

“A child in a lot of pain and distress was offered painkillers and then calmed down so much during the singing session that they were not necessary at that time.” (Nurse)

“Music has been helpful for us to get closer to him because at one point he pushed us away...Singing Medicine gave us the chance to do something together again as a family.” (Parent)

“Finding you can sing, is like finding temporary freedom from imprisonment. Suddenly, you do have a voice and you can express yourself and be understood by others. It is psychologically uplifting.” (Wife of stroke patient)

“We are now on our 6th session and my wife is able to sing her name and join in with all the songs despite still not being able to speak. Our Friday session is the highlight of her week.” (Husband of stroke patient attending Singing Pathways session.)