

Foreword

Words work well

Words are remarkable agents for change. When put together in stories, poems, plays and books, literature in whatever form, presents ideas, reflections and stimulates the imagination. One of my great heroes, Sir William Osler, a Canadian Physician, wrote that the writer uses words to bring him or her, “mind to mind” with the reader. Stories, books, poems are ways of connecting minds and people and making the reader think differently.

Words can also be used to expand knowledge and assist learning, and in clinical care that works both ways. The doctor or nurse can use words, written or spoken, to help the patient and family, by giving information and advice. But my experience is that it also works the other way, where the patient or the family, through their words and experiences can help the professional staff.

My own experience of bibliotherapy is with medical students and the ethical issues faced in medical practice. By presenting the students with stories and poems on ethical issues, the discussion opened up and allowed the words of the author to be a catalyst for changing ideas. This is an example of the use of words to bring people “mind to mind”. Creative writing is another way in which individuals or groups can express their feelings and share these with others.

The “Words Work Well” project already has a wide range of activities under way to help patients and their families and these are well set out on the website. Book clubs can stimulate thinking, allow an exchange of information and encourage individuals to share their experiences, thoughts and knowledge. Libraries are also places where people can go for help. The Macmillan Cancer Relief programmes in community libraries are very good examples of how this can be successfully achieved.

One aspect of books and stories which I have found helpful is to keep a Commonplace book, in which stories which carry meaning, are related to a particular topic or which have been found helpful are collected together and can be used as a source of help and inspiration.

Finally, the importance of stories in inspiring change. I have called this the “contagious theory of behaviour change” in which the power of the word is able to inspire and assist individuals. In using social media, the phrase “going viral” is regularly used as an idea, where a piece of news or an event is spread widely using the internet. In the same way stories and the word can “infect” the mind and result in positive change.

Well-being, quality of life and happiness are important to all of us, young or old, healthy or unwell. Words, through stories and books can provide a means to stimulate quality of life and improve well-being. The ways which are described to do this in “Words Work Well” provide a means to improve all of us.

Bibliotherapy, “words working well”, is one way in which people can benefit from stories and I am delighted to see the range of ways in which these can be presented and used to assist those who need help. This is an important initiative and I wish it well.

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