



Arts in oncology: integrating creative practices into hospital environments – The example of the Centre for Art and Medicine, University Hospital for Tumours (KBCSM)

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Summary

A growing body of evidence indicates that structured arts-in-health programmes can improve psychological well-being, reduce anxiety, enhance patient experience, and support healthcare staff resilience(1–3). This review outlines key international frameworks and empirical findings on the benefits of integrating arts into oncology care and presents the Centre for Art and Medicine at the University Hospital for Tumours (KBCSM) as a sustainable, long-term model of practice.

KEYWORDS: *arts in health; oncology; cultural interventions; art therapy; hospital environment; KBCSM*

INTRODUCTION: ARTS IN HEALTH AND ONCOLOGY CARE

Over the past two decades, the integration of arts into healthcare has emerged as a recognised interdisciplinary field known as arts in health or arts in medicine. The World Health Organization's scoping review of more than 3,000 studies demonstrated that participation in artistic activities contributes to prevention, enhanced well-being, treatment support, and rehabilitation, including in oncology settings(1). National frameworks such as the UK's Creative Health report and NHS evidence reviews confirm improved mental health, decreased stress biomarkers, better patient–clinician communication, and reduced isolation(2,6). In 2025, the OMC Working Group on Culture and Health of the European Commission published comprehensive recommendations acknowledging the importance of integrating culture into healthcare systems(8).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTRE FOR ART AND MEDICINE (KBCSM)

Although formally established in 2015 under Professor Danko Velimir Vrdoljak, the Centre's foundations were built in 2011 when Professor Fabijan Knežević launched the Panacea Gallery and transformed the hospital courtyard into a therapeutic garden. Following his departure, volunteers Ivanka Herman, Anica Vrdoljak, and Iva Kirac continued and formalised the programme. Regular exhibitions every two months were established, supported by formal collaborations with the Academy of Fine Arts (initially led by Prof. Rašić and currently Prof. Ivan Fijolić) (Figure 1), the Music Academy (MuK concert cycle organised by Brigita Vilč and Mojca Piškor) (Figure 2) and

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Figure 1. Exhibition – Raffaella Zenoni. Mother Earth /Majka Zemlja. Galerija Panacea, July and August 2025.



Figure 2. Concert MuK, May 16, 2018. Kvartet Grey: Marta Stanec, Lara Rimac, Sonja Jugo, Monika Hočevar

the Academy of Dramatic Art (performances coordinated by Zrinka Šamija and Krešimir Dolencić).

PARTNERSHIPS AND THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMME

A significant part of the Centre's programme is supported through partnerships with the Zagreb Cancer League, Sve za nju, Europa Donna, the Institute for Gastroenterological Tumours (IGET), and the Croatian League Against Cancer. These collaborations enable art therapy, movement therapy, music therapy, and additional psychosocial support. Oncology patients also benefit from a programme offering free museum admission via a dedicated card obtainable at the Centre or IGET.

ANNUAL SYMPOSIA AND POLICY-LEVEL COLLABORATION

Over the past three years, the Centre and IGET have co-organised an annual symposium on 4 April, gathering individuals and organisations working systematically in arts-in-health. These meetings facilitated formal cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Health. In 2024, both ministries jointly presented their role in the European Commission Working Group responsible for developing cross-sector recommendations linking culture and health(8,9).

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

The Centre has been invited by European institutions to present its model at several high-level events. Most notably, in 2024 it delivered a plenary presentation in Athens before directors of more

than 80 leading oncology institutes in Europe. The Ministry of Culture now financially supports the Centre's annual programme in partnership with IGET, with anticipated support from the Ministry of Health.

DISCUSSION

The Centre for Art and Medicine reflects international evidence demonstrating that structured arts programmes can improve patient experience, staff morale, and the therapeutic environment(1–4). UK data indicate not only psychosocial benefits but also economic value, as improved well-being is associated with reduced pressure on healthcare systems(2,6). The Centre's model shows that arts-in-health programmes can be implemented in oncology settings in a systematic, comprehensive, and sustainable way.

CONCLUSION

The Centre for Art and Medicine at KBCSM represents a mature and evidence-aligned example of arts-in-health practice. With growing policy-level engagement and positive patient feedback, it offers a replicable model for oncology institutions in Croatia and beyond.

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Sažetak

Umjetnost u onkologiji: Integriranje kreativnih praksi u bolnička okruženja – primjer Centra za umjetnost i medicinu Klinike za tumore, Kliničkog bolničkog centra Sestre milosrdnice

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U ovom radu prikazan je razvoj i djelovanje Centra za umjetnost i medicinu Klinike za tumore KBCSM te se taj primjer stavlja u kontekst suvremene međunarodne prakse integracije umjetnosti u zdravstvene sustave. Brojna istraživanja potvrđuju pozitivan utjecaj umjetničkih aktivnosti na psihološko stanje, smanjenje anksioznosti i bolje iskustvo liječenja onkoloških bolesnika. Prikazuju se ključni programi Centra, suradnje s umjetničkim akademijama i civilnim sektorom, terapijski pristupi te međunarodno prepoznata organizacijska održivost modela. Rad je usklađen s aktualnim europskim preporukama, uključujući OMC preporuke o kulturi i zdravlju iz 2025.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *umjetnost i zdravlje; onkologija; kultura i zdravlje; art terapija; humanizacija bolničkog prostora; KBCSM*