

# *Interview*

## Art in Health: Malaysian Experience

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### ABSTRACT

*Art in healthcare has gone through a broad movement around the world, encompassing how art influences patient care, the hospital environment, care, and community development in medical and other contexts. Therefore, in Malaysia, whether there is a development of art in health has been explored, and this study would like to know the extent to which the development of art intervention in health occurs. Qualitative data through the interview method was used in this study by interviewing medical doctors who had been involved in art interventions in health. Having artistic knowledge in health research is very important to know and understand that many approaches have been used to date.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, art intervention, healthcare, interview*

### INTRODUCTION

Art in health (also known as art in medicine or art in healthcare) is a broad, multidisciplinary field that focuses on using the art to improve health and the healthcare experience. The art in health field builds on the deep and enduring connections between the art and health (National Organization for Art in Health 2017). Cathy (2010) describes a large worldwide movement that includes how the art affects patient care, hospital environments, caregiver care, and community development in medical and other settings.

Art has been translated in Islamic medicine through Islamic philosophy. Islamic philosopher, al-Farabi said in the book *al-Musiqa* that sound can affect humans, especially in health. Al-Musiqa means *al-alhan* (melody) and it specifically refers to the singing voice (vocals). While in general, it means any tone, even if it is not accompanied by any pronunciation or vowels. Shehadi (1995) states that melody, in al-Farabi's view, is the inclusion of a particular group of tones arranged in an orderly fashion so as to produce a melodic set of melodies.

In the Zengid era, the establishment of the hospital was complemented by the use of musical instruments in music therapy. Gorini (2007), Erdal and Erbas (2013), and Benek et al. (2015) say that such hospitals were built during the Abbasids, Zengids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, Seljuks-Anatolia, and Ottomans. Among the Abbasid hospitals are al-Adudi Hospital and al-Mansuri Hospital Bimaristan Nur al-Din was developed.

Art in health has been used through art therapy in dementia care, namely art therapy: interventions including music therapy, visual art therapy, drama therapy, dance/movement therapy, mixed or miscellaneous art therapy, and activity-based interventions (Beard 2011). Possessing knowledge of art in health research is very important to identify and be informed that many approaches have been used until now.

**Question:** First of all, thank you, Dr. Vincent, from the School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Dr. Cecilia Chan Woen Min, Elder Care Service Coordinator, Bagan Specialist Centre, for being willing to attend this virtual interview session due to the current constraint of COVID-19 pandemic. The first question, how are you involved in promoting the use of art in health?

**Dr. Vincent:** Thank you Asyraf for your invitation. It was a pleasure, and I am honoured to be invited for this interview. I think this would be an interesting interview topic. Regarding your first question, I'm actually doing research pertaining mind-body techniques like hypnotherapy, progressive muscle relaxation, and relaxation breathing to help patients with irritable bowel syndrome. My actual title is "Development of culturally specific guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation therapy for the treatment of functional bloating." So, how do I integrate art into health? Well, I guessed it's pretty straight-forward. I integrated the background music or soundscape created by Dr. Kamal into my therapeutic audio script. The soundscape is composed using traditional Malay musical instruments like the *gambus* and *seruling*, as well as natural sounds like the rustling of leaves, birds chirping, and rivers flowing. Furthermore, the soundscape is camouflaged with alpha waves. This is done so that the patients can feel as much relaxation as possible.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Okay, so yeah, I mean thank you, I'm more than happy. So, during this current phase and much more even before the pandemic, it has already been established that art is a very significant tool to engage people at all ages. You know, we are humans that grow old, especially during post-retirement because we have more leisure time. We do not have the time; I mean free time from when we're raising our children. We have less free time during employment, so we have extra time now. This extra time has to be conducive for anyone to engage so that we can live our lives to the fullest, even in retirement, and this is where art comes into play. So, I do have my centre back at the senior citizen club. We call it the "joy club." We currently have more than 2,000 members here. Before the pandemic, we were very active as we met physically, and we had many activities from talk sessions. We are talking about the art now, so we do have art in terms of dancing, music, singing bowls, and all of the arts to engage them, to stimulate them, and that we can find humans value in. Due to the lockdown, we are forced to go virtually. Most of our sessions are done online, and it is still going until now.

**Question:** You have been involved with media art as a health aid. Is art, as non-pharmacology, very important for health care in the medical world, especially in Malaysia?

**Dr. Vincent:** I think for now, yes, as music is often regarded as something like entertainment or subsidiary. Prioritisation was given in terms of its usage in healthcare treatment because there's very little research being done in Malaysia or even around the world. There are a limited number of music therapy treatments available in Malaysia. Many Malaysians are still not aware of the benefits of music therapy or how music can have such an impact on their healthcare treatment. So, I felt there was a need to address this issue as to answer your question. There is quite a bit of scientific evidence that suggest the efficacy and benefits of relaxing music among patients staying in the ward. A few studies have suggested its benefits in reducing anxiety, promoting a better quality of life, and also improving the quality of stay in the ward.

Besides, as you may have heard, a doctor's job is to treat a patient's medical or biological issues. Doctors often prioritise treating patients with medications or procedural treatments. It's more like you know, "*bagi ubat je*," then the patient just "*duduk diam*" and wait till them "*sembuh*." Less emphasis is actually given to the psychosocial issues faced by the patients. There may have been some internal thoughts leading to anxiety and stress faced by them. Therefore, something like complementary therapy, for instance, music therapy, may help them to relax and calm their minds. This somewhat insignificant, small act of kindness may have a positive impact on their time spent in the ward, especially during times like this in a pandemic.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Hmm, I mean, I think this is proven worldwide. You know, it has been researched and established internationally that art is a vital way to support the well-being of human beings, in particular the elderly group and particularly those who are experiencing some cognitive decline. I think now, what concerns us is that we are talking about those living with dementia, whereby there is no cure available. So, we now have to focus on supporting them. In supporting them, I want to look at what is preserved for people living with dementia. So, we focus on what skills are still available for them, and that's where art and music therapy play a significant role in supporting those living with dementia in particular.

**Question:** Art in health is a new method in the world and is gaining attention and affecting health. What is the development of art in health in Malaysia?

**Dr. Vincent:** I think the concept of "art in health" is still new in Malaysia. Across the globe, this concept has started to gain attention and is progressing slowly. In fact, the Malaysia Music Therapy Association has slowly

taken up initiatives to promote awareness of treating patients with music therapy around Malaysia. In short, I would say the concept is progressing slowly but surely, and I hope more and more Malaysians will slowly welcome this idea of incorporating the art into healthcare treatments.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Unfortunately, in Malaysia, it is not pretty much heard off. This is why I am aggressively trying to promote this because in Malaysia, we are a medically dominated industry still now. Fortunately, we all look to the hospital, health professionals for cure, and so on. It is a very inventive stage, especially when in a situation that is established right now, that there is no cure, really much after diagnosis, there are nothing medical professionals can do about it. There is nothing that they can do to try to cure it, but then we have realised what we have available now, what we use and the music, and to them and to me, it is hard to imagine art as a hope holistic. So, the very invention stage is new. We need to educate the public to create awareness. That is why I'm doing it.

**Question:** In Malaysia, there are many health organisations such as nursing homes, hospitals, and medical facilities for health purposes. Is there art in health support in Malaysia?

**Dr. Vincent:** Still, this is something new in health art, something new in Malaysia. I think Dr. Kamal Sabran did a study to help patients with Alzheimer's stay at nursing homes. In my practice, my university has a team we call the USM Kubang Kerian Symphony Orchestra team.<sup>1</sup> I am a committee member and was one of the past presidents. We have organised a few activities related to the promotion of the art in health. For instance, we organised a drumming session with patients suffering from cerebral palsy, a disorder where they face problems in controlling their muscle movements. Moreover, we also went to Pusat Latihan Perindustrian dan Pemulihan (PLPP) Bangi, a training centre for the disabled and disadvantaged in Bangi. We conducted an intensive training course while setting up an orchestra team there. As a matter of fact, this was the first OKU<sup>2</sup> orchestra team in Bangi to perform in front of a big audience, in front of the ministers and their family members. The inmates from PLPP were happy. One of them even told us that she gained confidence after learning how to play the violin. In countries outside of Malaysia, there are studies and organisations using visually guided imagery therapies to help with the rehabilitation of patients suffering from stroke. Similarly, there is also a music therapist that helps patients with mobilisation difficulties, post-operative patients, patients with strokes, or people undergoing rehabilitation. The therapist will be there to support and assist with their rehab. Also, there are a few studies using relaxation audio to calm patients before an operation. These methods have proven to be able to reduce patients' anxiety pre- and post-operation, leading to a better quality of healthcare treatment.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Yeah, unfortunately, it is not. Okay, so for example, there is a coming conference, I mean all the conferences I attend, like 20 over the years, on ageing, dementia-related conferences, and all that. The conference is usually dominated by the medical profession people; neurology, geriatrics, cardiology, with all the other medical specialists take in different parts of the brain, organs, and so on. So, we don't have people representing the elderly other than themselves. I'm 40 now, and that's why I need tradition; we're getting old, and that's something we have to deal with. I mean, we all grow and die, but in between we live, so how do we maximise our time, especially when all of the problems are not resolved? What we need is to be socially integrated, and we need social support. We need interaction. This kind of things, like music therapy and art therapy, are very important in most of our healthcare settings. Others are nursing homes, daycare facilities, and much more in medical institutions. So, it is unfortunate that we rarely discuss whether there are enough scenarios in the clinical, I reasoned.

**Question:** Based on your experience producing research on the use of art in health, what are the advantages and benefits of using art in health compared to the use of other treatment methods?

**Dr. Vincent:** I think, so far, one of the advantages of implementing "art in health" is that it would be more welcomed and accepted by the community in Malaysia, especially in specific communities where their educational level is lower. The majority of them were constantly concerned that their medications would have negative effects on their bodies. For instance, they had the idea that "eating too much Panadol may cause them to have kidney disease" or "the COVID-19 vaccine might make our bodies weak." Thus, they might have resistance to medical treatment provided by the doctors. However, if we were to incorporate culturally tailored artwork into health care, patients might be more open towards it. For example, the soundscapes created by Dr. Kamal Sabran were actually composed using traditional Malay instruments like *kompang*, *gambus*, and *seruling*. When I felt like explaining that we had created a relaxation audio for the patients using such

instruments, they were like “*biar betul ni,*” “*bolehlah Dr., saya try lah.*” The patients seem more interested in trying out the new treatments method we provide for them.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Yes, because when you use art, it is something that is very natural, number one. Okay, it’s now available, and the best part is that it has no side effects. You don’t have to worry about side effects like drowsiness, nausea, or irritation of the digestive system. We are free from side effects in the most natural things to do, you know, because we are born that way, we are another. We are artistic in one way or another, whether through music, dancing, or art and craft. Somehow, we naturally have that because we have part of the brain that pretty much takes in until we need the world, and so we are using a very interesting part of our brain, which is actually made natural. So, we are using what God has given to us. So, this is very natural. We just try to use it and its low cost. It helps us to interact with each other. We can come together and sing, dance, create music, interact; it can kind of link us all intergenerationally. *Cucu* and *cicit* come together and sing, giving *pantun*, *bahas*, and all that.

**Question:** You support the use of art in health. What is the status of your current research in the present and in the future?

**Dr. Vincent:** My current research, which is still in data collection stage, is almost done with the publication. I’m still starting to write and discuss research, but you can still view some of my work abstracts or search at my research profile on LinkedIn and ResearchGate. In the future, I will make a few more audio and have a few more chemotherapy audio scripts narrated in different languages and dialects because my current research uses one audio script in *bahasa* Kelantan to actually ask the patient “*tarik nafas, koho-koho, dale-dale,*” things like that, something culturally related to a community. So, in the future I will do different languages like Mandarin, even using Hokkien, Cantonese dialect, Tamil, maybe try *bahasa* Terengganu—*kecek ganu*, and to try different languages in Malaysia. You know, to give more people access to this, to be able to really appreciate all the therapy sessions.

**Dr. Cecilia:** Okay, so right now I am collaborating with people like Dr. Kamal Sabran. Now, this is my added experience while working on the ground itself. And from the grassroots, we can see the huge impact it has on the “quality of life” in adults, especially those living with dementia compared to those who do not. I am also starting my own centre. This centre is a daycare, so we actually have more adult people because previously it was a scary place. We have a centre and a lot of work can be done for variety of purposes. Enabling people like you from the university to come to the centre and then, together, we can collaborate, and then we can develop further positively about this because, although we have a long way to go, we are starting this way.

**Question:** Finally, do you have any suggestions on how to improve research and the art industry’s health in Malaysia in the future?

**Dr. Vincent:** Now, to answer your question, we can look at things from a few different perspectives. First and foremost, we must raise awareness in Malaysia about the use of art in health care. Researchers should publish more work to prove the efficacy and benefits of such a concept. Number two, there should be more collaboration between health professionals and people from the arts industry, for example, people like you and Dr. Kamal Sabran. In terms of research and talks, there should be more cooperation, teamwork, and collaboration. We can do a lot of work by bringing the true elements of people together once, and then creating something fantastic and amazing. Number three, I felt that researchers should really try and explore this new “art in health” element, and then there should be more research grants and emphasis given to this type of research.

**Dr. Cecilia:** I think to do that, we need to collaborate and work together. Number one is to create awareness and I just want to share to all so take note. We had a very interesting journey last Friday. We were connected with this group called “Reimagining Dementia” from New York. We are co-relation and going international. We hope we have international support to collaborate with them, to work with them, to create culture of dementia care with us. I had a session with them. I told them this is me. I am representing Malaysia and finding what I do. Then I got reconnected with them. We are organising an age global platform in Malaysia. I hope that you join me after the interview on that. We go on this group platform, which showcased Malaysia on the global platform on what we are doing now, so we can create awareness globally because our policymakers and all those important people do not know because it is medically oriented, and only we can get people to come together and see. Wow, we have created such a huge positive impact on people living with dementia, care

partners, and society as a whole, only to jump up and push the government, nursing, our hospital care system, all that. They recognise music and art as equally important tools, as evidenced in the lives of people living with dementia, the elderly, and the committee in general. I think that is the point.

**Interviewers:** Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us. We really appreciate your open and honest perspectives on so many issues in the topic of art in health: Malaysian experience.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Art in health is a new method that goes through an art-based intervention process. The use of art in health is very important because it is a non-pharmacological treatment of health that naturally does not use drugs. However, there is still a lot of effort to be done in Malaysia, which we still have less awareness and less usage of treatment.

## NOTES

1. USM is the acronym for Universiti Sains Malaysia. USM Kubang Kerian is the health campus of Universiti Sains Malaysia located in Kubang Kerian, Kelantan.
2. OKU stands for *orang kelainan upaya* (person with disabilities).

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