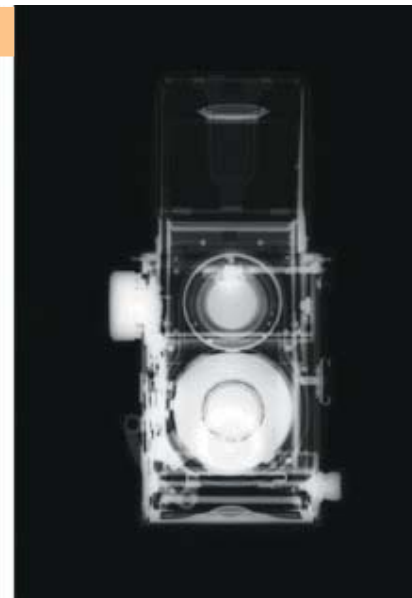


Good health

focusinterview



One of the international speakers heading to Port Macquarie for 'The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing' international arts and health conference in November 2009 is psychiatrist Dr Gary Christenson, MD, Director of the Boynton Mental Health Clinic and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Minnesota Medical School. Dr Christenson is also Artistic Director of the Center for Art and Medicine at the University. In an exclusive interview with Focus, Dr Christenson describes innovative ways that the University cares for its students' health.

Gary, tell us about the University of Minnesota and the student health service.

The University of Minnesota is composed of five separate regional campuses. I work at Boynton Health Service on the Twin Cities campus, which serves students attending classes in Minneapolis and St Paul. Founded in 1851, the University is the second largest campus in the United States. The Twin Cities campus alone has nearly 70,000 students, faculty and staff.

Boynton Health Service has been conducting comprehensive student health surveys of both undergraduate and graduate students, which have included questions related to mental health. Our 2007 survey (www.bhs.umn.edu/healthdata/results/chs/UMTC_07/UMTC_Report2.pdf), revealed that 70% of college students reported they were stressed, and a third of those students said that stress was hurting their academic performance. Students reported a 27% lifetime incidence of mental illness; the twelve month prevalence was 16%. We know from other studies that 10% of students have thought of suicide, but our studies revealed that 1% of students had actually attempted to take their life within the last year.

An added problem for this generation is that they have grown up with computers, video games, and wireless devices. Our studies reveal that 30% of students report excessive screen time and that 13% of those report that it has impacted their studies.

The University of Minnesota has been committed to combating mental illness and making students aware of available University health services. As Director of the Mental Health Clinic and a physician with a strong interest in the arts, I look for arts programming opportunities to assist in breaking down the stigma associated with mental health as well as providing support for students challenged

by depression, anxiety, and other mental and physical disorders.

> How did you conceive the idea of an arts and health program?

The University of Minnesota has a large and dynamic art program. We have a number of galleries on campus, including the Frank Gehry designed Weisman Art Museum, libraries, theatres, with a vibrant program of exhibitions, film, music, drama and dance performances. However, the health service and other non-arts buildings have been relatively isolated from the potential benefits of these resources.

About five years ago, our clinic underwent a renovation. We had new walls, carpet, and wall covering but no art on the walls. I had just moved from a house to a condominium and no longer had space to fully display my art collection, so I brought in a silk kimono, some Inuit and Japanese woodblock prints, as well as some paintings and photography provided by relatives and friends to hang in the hallways. Soon, other staff members started adding their own contributions. We

received comments from our student patients that it was helpful and soothing, and that they could use the art as a way to break the ice. Administration also took notice and requested that I establish and chair an art committee.

Features of our program now include permanent displays and rotating exhibits, the creation of art through inter-departmental collaborations between the health service and the art department, photo and art competitions for staff, special exhibitions to raise consciousness on social topics, and performances by music therapy students in the lobbies with a research component.

College campus health clinics present a unique challenge to the economic sustainability of an arts program due to the limited and highly scrutinized funding sources of student service fees and insurance plans. Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of our art project is the low expense. The original

budget was \$10,000 a year, but the program now runs on donations alone. So it is an inspiration for those who face the usual monetary challenges.

The same setting provides unique opportunities for the development of an art enhanced healing environment due to the physical and organisational proximities of multidiscipline departments aligned for the common goal of the intellectual, physical and emotional development of young adults.

> Please describe several of the Clinic's Mental Health programs.

The Mental Health Clinic has four psychiatrists, two psychologists and six clinical social workers and provides mental health assessments, medication management, chemical health counselling, social work services and individual, couples and group therapy. In addition, the University has a separate University Counselling and Consulting Services. As director of the Service I am also involved in a Provost's Committee on Student Mental Health, which has pulled together multiple campus stakeholders on mental health issues to make mental health services on campus more seamless.

One of our big successes has been the creation of a centralised website www.mentalhealth.umn.edu which offers information, screening and other mental health services for students, staff, faculty and parents. In addition, we have been conducting educational presentations to staff and faculty on how to identify, approach, and refer students who appear to be distressed.

Another effort on campus is the Stamp Out Stigma Committee, which has worked closely with Boynton's marketing department to launch several web based and poster campaigns that have increased referrals to our clinic.

Our campus also has a local chapter of Active Minds, a national student group that educates about mental health and advocates for students with mental illness. Active Minds, in collaboration with Stamp Out Stigma, the Center for Art and Medicine, and Boynton Health Service recently put on an exhibition involving student artists entitled *Awake: Seeing Mental Health through Art*.

> How is the Center for Art and Medicine connected with the University?

The University's Center for Art and Medicine

has its offices in the Boynton building and seeks to infuse the arts in medical training and encourage their incorporation in clinics and hospitals. Following the success of the Clinic's arts program, I was invited to become the Artistic Director of the three year old Center.

> What inspired you to take up painting?

Early in my art programming efforts, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Harold Adams, an obstetrician/gynaecologist in the community, who came down with severe hepatitis B just as he was planning to retire. Harold decided to devote what little time he had left to take art courses. His illness reversed course and he went on to receive his MFA from the U of M and have a one man show at the Weisman Art Museum on art and healing. Harold believes that his art making cured his Hepatitis B and at 86, he is still painting every day. Harold wants everyone to paint and it soon became clear that I would not be an exception. He told me, "I am going to make you my project, young man," so I had to come up with a painting if I was going to visit him again.

> What attracted you to the international arts and health conference in Port Macquarie in November?

In Buffalo, earlier this year, I attended the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (SAH) annual meeting and met Margret Meagher, from Arts and Health Australia, who is organising the Australian conference. The University of Minnesota is hosting the 2010 SAH conference, so Margret and I gravitated towards each other to swap notes. Margret subsequently invited me to present at 'The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing' conference and contribute to the international debate and information exchange relating to the arts and student health. It was an invitation too good to refuse.

'The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing' international arts and health conference will be held in Port Macquarie from 10 to 13 November 2009.

For more details, visit www.artsandhealth.org or email info@artsandhealth.org or telephone 0416 641 482.

> Thank you Gary.