



ARTS AND HEALTH

The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing international arts and health conference is fast approaching. Events include creative ageing, art and dementia, sacred circle dancing, a toolkit for arts and health programs and much, much more.

When Victorian playwright, filmmaker and actor Alan Hopgood AM was diagnosed with prostate cancer, he turned to his skill as a writer for support and solace. The result was a book documenting his devastating experience entitled "Surviving Prostate Cancer – One Man's Journey", which was published in 1996. Alan subsequently adapted his story into a comedy about men's health, intimacy and cancer, "For Better, For Worse". And the concept of HealthPlay was launched.

Comedy is one of the best ways for breaking down barriers about health and relationship issues that are confronting and is the key to the popularity of Alan Hopgood's series of plays, under the HealthPlay banner. They cover a diverse range of subjects such as diabetes for women and men ("A Pill, a Pump and a Needle" and "Six Degrees of Diabetes"), geriatric sex ("Never Too Old"), widowhood ("Wicked Widows") and most recently palliative care ("Four Funerals in One Day").

Theatre goers will recall Alan Hopgood's full length play "The Carer", starring Charles 'Bud' Tingwell (2000), which has been highly praised for its sensitive treatment of Alzheimer's disease and its warmth and humour.

Many will also know Alan Hopgood from his roles as the popular Dr Reed in "Bellbird", Wally in "Prisoner" and Jack Lassiter in "Neighbours". The first of his successful plays "And The Big Men Fly" was staged by the Melbourne Theatre Company in 1963 and he followed this with "The Golden Legion Of Cleaning Women" and the first play in the world on the Vietnam war, "Private Yuk Objects".

Alan's career in film and television has included Awigie awards for "The Cheerful Cuckold" and "The Bush Bunch" and several feature films such as "Alvin Purple" and the documentaries "The Prophecies Of Nostradamus" and "The Fountain Of Youth". Alan also adapted the War Diaries of Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop for the play "Weary" which toured successfully in Australia.

Alan Hopgood, with a support cast from

Melbourne, will present "Four Funerals in One Day" in Port Macquarie next month at "The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing" arts and health conference, organised by Arts and Health Australia (www.artsandhealth.org).

Sponsored by Palliative Care Victoria and written in collaboration with Molly Carlile, manager of the largest palliative care consortium in Victoria, "Four Funerals in One Day" is about a young palliative care nurse, caring for her first dying patient who wants to end it all. She finds her request for advice from her more experienced nursing colleagues has interesting twists. It is alternately funny, sad, wry, with plenty of one liners that hit home.

"The play explores the role of story telling in palliative care and does not aim to present a best practice model", says Molly, "but at its core is the need for us all to embrace the influence of other peoples' stories on the development of our own personal and professional life story".

Molly Carlile, nurse, counsellor and educator, is also presenting a keynote address at the conference titled "Dead Scared; creating a safe space for scary conversations". As Molly explains, "Discussions about death are usually carried out in sterile hospital environments or in busy medical clinics. Patients and families are often huddled into a small, sparsely furnished room to hear that no more can be done for them and they need to go home and 'get their affairs in order'. This is the memory that has so often been shared with me by people who are struggling to come to terms with a terminal diagnosis.

Discussions about death are not comfortable for the patient, their family or the health professional charged with 'breaking the bad news' and therefore they are often avoided or carried out with little preparation. The result of these poorly prepared and executed conversations is that the health professional feels they have failed (because they could not meet the expectations of the patient) and the patient feels abandoned by the health care team, because they have not been able to talk about their fears or clarify 'where to from here'."

The arts, says Molly, can be used effectively as a vehicle for creating a safe space for discussing death, grief and loss with patients and families living with a terminal illness. Based on findings from her recent Churchill Fellowship, Molly points to the fact that the arts, including music, visual art and theatre, were used historically to create safe and sacred spaces and similar approaches applied in contemporary health settings are facilitating therapeutic relationships that are demonstrably more supportive for patients and families. Molly is currently working on a book about grief for adolescents, due for publication in 2010.

On a similar theme, "New Leaves" is an arts and health program that explores the relationship between writing and healing for people with a terminal illness. Led by academic Dr Carolyn Rickett from Lake Macquarie's Avondale College, the research team included Sydney GP, Dr Jill Gordon, assoc/professor at the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine at Sydney University and founder of the Medical Humanities Association of Australia and New Zealand. Dr Gordon will give a presentation about the "New Leaves" project at the conference.

Jill Gordon explains: "People who experience a life threatening illness often receive excellent technical care, but their personal illness journey may not find expression. Writing poetry is one way of helping people to uncover and listen to the deeper meanings of their lives; it enables people to feel their lives, rather than withdraw into emotional numbness or paralysis. We devised the 'New Leaves Poetry Writing Project' to provide an outlet for this creative impulse. Twenty-eight people participated in the classes with professional poet, Judith Beveridge and had the opportunity to compose, read and refine their own poetry. The program was run with two groups, so that we could compare the effect of the program on each group separately. We also interviewed the participants before and after the poetry workshop series, to identify the features that they valued most. When the classes were complete, we gathered examples of the poetry for publication in an anthology that we called

'New Leaves' to reflect the idea of starting over after a serious illness."

"New Leaves", takes its title from Richard Aldington's poem "New Love." "The poem depicts the resilience and recovery of the human heart," says Carolyn Rickett. "Aldington likens the healing experience to an almond tree that now has new leaves after being initially damaged by frost."

Author, media personality and former Australian rugby union international Peter FitzSimons, and a cousin of one of the participants, says in the foreword: "What comes through in these poems . . . is enormous wisdom and appreciation for what really matters - family, sunny days, friendships, reaching out . . . and a determination to do everything possible to get well again, to experience more of it."

Comments by participants reflect a range of human emotions. A doctor, who found she had breast cancer, said: "I found that my medical knowledge did not shield me one iota from the experience of my own human frailty and vulnerability in the face of potentially serious illness". Although sceptical at first, she found writing poetry a way to tackle her fears and feelings. Another described the "process of writing as "allow[ing] me to untangle the emotions within." In her poem "Ribbons of Love," which she wrote for her daughters, she writes, "Clip [the ribbons] onto your belts if needed for safety, or knot colourful strings on your fingers to remind you to be kind to yourself."

The Art of Good Health and Wellbeing international arts and health conference, 10 – 13 November 2009, Glasshouse Arts Conference and Entertainment Centre, Port Macquarie.

Pre-conference workshops on creative ageing, art and dementia, sacred circle dancing, a toolkit for arts and health programs and a 3 day training program for visual artists and musicians working in healthcare will be held from 7 to 10 November 2009.

For more details, log on to www.artsandhealth.org, email info@artsandhealth.org, telephone 02 6583 5040 or 0416 641 482.