



## The Arts

### Painting the place where procedures cause pain

Freelance Artist, London, UK (SB); Vital Arts, Barts Health NHS Trust, London, UK (JS); and Wolfson Institute of Population Health, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK (SH)  
s.p.hibbs@qmul.ac.uk

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We declare no competing interests.

**Stephen Hibbs:** In all the hospitals I have trained in, the designated haematology procedure rooms have had no natural light. Their walls are drab and bare, and they have sometimes doubled up as store rooms. These rooms are used for bone marrow biopsies and intrathecal chemotherapy administration: interventions that can cause substantial pain and anxiety. What do unwelcoming and bleak rooms communicate to the patients who come into them for procedures?

I considered this question with some nursing colleagues on the Barts Hospital (London, UK) day unit, where I work as a haematology registrar. I wondered, could we

get permission for a painting or poster, something to make the space more human, more thoughtful? A clinical nurse specialist suggested that I contact the hospital Trust's in-house Arts and Health service, known as Vital Arts—a charitably funded organisation that delivers art projects across the hospital trust. They work with artists and hospital staff to improve the visual environment for patients. After initial conversations, several granted permissions, and a successful funding request, a plan began to take shape.

**Jessica Shiel:** I work as the Arts Manager for Vital Arts. My role involves working in partnership with clinical staff, artists, and cultural organisations to devise and deliver site-specific commissioned artworks. Before undertaking any art commission, it is essential for us to first have a deep understanding of the space in which the artwork will be installed. We examine what treatments are done in the room, the anxieties and concerns patients might have when entering the room, and how long a patient might expect to spend in the area. For this commission it was especially important to reflect on how a patient might move around the room. Because patients need to lean forward or lie in a specific position for long stretches of time, we wanted to allow for targeted viewpoints. We felt an immersive commission which unfolds across the walls, containing a series of highly detailed vignettes, would hold interest for the duration of treatment.

With any commission our intention is to alleviate anxiety and to help draw focus away from the body, stressful treatments, and hospital visits and towards the joy found in everyday life. We commissioned Sabine Beitzke (a freelance artist) for the procedure room because we felt her style, which explores the escapism offered by the natural world, and its capacity for healing, were particularly apt for this windowless space. Similarly, we felt that the soft, delicate lines of the artist's hand-drawn imagery, which was translated into vinyl, would act as an excellent counterpoint to the clinical and stark space.

Vital Arts sees hospitals as key civic spaces which provide the opportunity to introduce new audiences to contemporary art. As a highly used hub within a community, the art within a hospital should be significant, site-specific, and patient responsive. In addition to positively influencing the visual environment; in the ever-expanding field of arts and health research, studies have shown that interaction with the arts and creativity boosts wellbeing, promotes resilience, and can support clinical aims.

**Sabine Beitzke:** I first came across Vital Arts when I was researching ways to combine my work as an illustrator



**Figure 1:** The procedure room before Sabine's artwork. The empty wall would take up the visual field for a patient undergoing procedures, who would normally be lying on their left side.



**Figure 2:** The redesigned procedure room, with Sabine's artwork installed.

with health care. I am familiar with how it feels to spend days in a sterile medical environment with people rushing past through long, bleak corridors. I believe that thoughtfully designed art can bring distraction and warmth, and can communicate that a patient is seen as a person, rather than a number within the health-care system. During my studies at university and the first years of freelancing, I focused mainly on narrative illustration for a younger audience. Until collaborating with Vital Arts, I had deliberately drawn a clear line between my passion for art and a more personally motivated passion for health and well being. Eventually, this personal pursuit grew into the wish to use my illustration skills to support people with health problems and to give the best possible support with the tools I have.

Finding an appropriate visual tone for the procedure room was initially challenging and humbling. I wanted to create something uplifting that would help people feel calmer and safe, and less cutoff from the rest of the world. At the same time, I was also worried about upsetting patients by making them feel misunderstood. It took a few conversations with Vital Arts to stop worrying about causing offense, so I could reconnect with my initial motivation and instincts. The artwork had to be immersive and therefore huge, something that would draw people in and spark their imagination. Not all walls in the room were suitable for reproducing illustrations onto a vinyl wallpaper, so I decided to

accompany the wallpaper with some framed original illustrations for a gentle transition. There were other influences on the design: the hospital infection control policy required the art work to be bleach-resistant, and I also considered where the patient would be positioned during procedures.

A nature theme felt appropriate. It is the source of life itself and holds a place for everyone to rest and recharge. It does not judge us, regardless of our physical and emotional state. Rhythms of nature, untouched by our personal turmoils, are reliable when our own world is upside down. I wanted to communicate the comfort of normality with familiar and easily accessible outdoor activities: walking a dog, admiring the freckles of a golden pear, or reading among the flowers. I hoped these would be things to look forward to after the treatment.

**Stephen Hibbs:** It is a startling transformation. Many patients have admired the artwork as they come into the room for their procedure. One woman commented that she did not see the point of it, but during her bone marrow biopsy, she changed her mind. Afterwards, she explained that it had been a help—she had spent the procedure exploring the details of the picture, counting the leaves, and wondering why there was an armchair next to the pond. I hope that others also find something in Sabine's work that makes their next procedure a little less grim.

*Sabine Beitzke, Jessica Shiel, Stephen Hibbs*

For more on the **patient's experience of bone marrow biopsies** see *HemaSphere* 6: e710

For more on **Vital Arts** see <http://www.vitalarts.org.uk/>

For more on **arts and health research** see [https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative\\_Health\\_Inquiry\\_Report\\_2017\\_-\\_Second\\_Edition.pdf](https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf)

For more on **Sabine Beitzke's artwork** see <https://en.sabine-beitzke.com/>