

Study on the use of Art therapy for mental health recovery being undertaken in Fiji



Participants during the art-making program in Fiji, which is the practical side of the study

A team of academic experts and health professionals from Australia are working with the Fiji National University (FNU) and Ministry of Health Services to study the experience of art-making in healing people with mental illness.

The Head of School Medical Science at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS), Dr Odille Chang, a Senior Lecturer at the La Trobe University, Dr Patricia Fenner are the chief investigators, and Lecturer Dr Sefanaia Qaloewai is the co-investigator of this research.



According to Dr Qaloewai (*pictured*), 'Art-making and mental health – a pilot focus group study in Suva, Fiji' is the first of its kind of research being conducted in Fiji.

He said the overall objective is to gain an understanding of the potential value and possible meaning of art-making in the context of mental health recovery in Fiji.

"Art-making provides a platform to explore mental illness in a way that is acceptable to the various cultures in Fiji where stigma still exists," said Dr Qaloewai.

"It is safe to say that group art-making works well culturally in the Pacific context and can be used as a vehicle to help individuals suffering from mental difficulties to use art to find their voice and expressions to their experiences."

"In this way, art-making activities provide a unique medium to people who have been diagnosed with mental illness to express their feeling and opinions, on which international research literature are reporting significant therapeutic value."

Senior Australian academic Dr Fenner (*pictured*), who is also a researcher in the field of psychology and public health, said emerging international research has shown that art can be a healing force for people with mental disorder.



"By understanding the experiences of the people involved in making art in the Fiji context, we expect to gain a greater understanding of how this activity affects people's mental health recovery and through this; we expect that a foundation for further art activities can be identified," said the senior researcher.

"If you were to make an art form, you can look at it and say 'that is saying something about myself' and sometimes that

information can be very profound, or it can be deeply moving, and occasionally upsetting – it's not always joyous, but the art-making process tends to be a very joyous experience."

"The use of art materials tends to be calming. There is a phenomenon of absorption, which is one of the therapeutic benefits. There are behavioural, psychological and psychotherapeutic impacts from the art-making process."

"The art program in Fiji has been going on for 12 months now, which is the practical side of the study. At the research side, we have been gathering data. The findings will be formed into an academic publication which will then be submitted to a highly regarded journal so that this can become part of international knowledge about Fiji."

In order to obtain a broad perspective, several participants involved in different areas of mental health have been included in the focus groups.

"We decided to have three focus groups; consumers or members who have participated in the art activities directly, carers of the consumers involved in order to gain knowledge about the project and its impact from a carer perspective, together with staff from mental health services involved either through making referrals, actively supporting consumers to be involved, or in any way having an interest in the art project."

Although the data collected is yet to be analyzed, Dr Fenner revealed that they have come across new perspectives about art-making from people involved in mental health services.

"Something that so far seems to be unique in this program is that, in other studies that I have been involved in, art was only done by the people with mental illness, but in this program some of the staff also took part in the art-making activity and have talked about the impact it has had on them and how that has helped them understand their patients, their clients and members."

"The carers have also participated in their own art-making, which has provided health and well-being impacts on their own lives and potentially one could hypothesize that this could have long term impacts on their capacity to be carers – it is too early to say this definitively, but these are things that no other project that I have been involved in has done. This has really evolved out of Fijian activities."

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