



Final Report Innovation Grant, Singing Medicine, Ex Cathedra, Julie Watson

Overview

Singing Medicine aims to bring the many well-being benefits of singing play to poorly babies and children in Birmingham Children's Hospital. Interactive singing games aid communication, enable children to make decisions, support and encourage movement (where appropriate), develop personal and social skills, are fun, calming or stimulating (depending on need), develop vocal and musicianship skills, and enable play between children and their family members and hospital staff.

Before the pandemic, each and every Friday, a team of 8 Ex Cathedra Vocal Tutors (working in pairs) spent the day at Birmingham Children's Hospital working with children in all in-patient areas across the hospital including in the Intensive Care Unit and with those who are isolated.

Since lockdown, we have delivered the programme online, full details are within this report.

Our interactive songs and singing games, many of which have been composed by the team, are completely inclusive with regards to capabilities, clinical needs, language and background, vocal skills and musicianship, and are also a lot of fun. Sessions take place in the most appropriate space for each child, for example at the bedside, in groups, or even whilst a procedure is being carried out to distract and soothe.

Every session follows a similar structure - an introductory activity, main game/s and finishing activity, such as a goodbye song. Each session lasts as long as is appropriate for each child, which is usually around 15 minutes.

The Grant

Since 2004, our highly qualified Vocal Tutors (who are members of the choir) visit babies, children, and teenagers aged 0-16 in every in-patient and out-patient area of Birmingham Children's Hospital (including Burns, Neonatal, Dialysis and Intensive Care Units) to deliver Singing Medicine's singing games, which are completely inclusive with regards to ages, capabilities, clinical needs, language and

background, vocal skills and musicianship, and are playful and fun, or soothing and calming – depending on what is appropriate and requested by medical staff.

The team has developed and composed special repertoire and ways of working which enable children with life-limiting conditions to participate in, and benefit from, singing activities.



Activity is developed to meet the needs of each child, so for children in isolation bays or unable to get out of bed - bedside sessions take place - sometimes activities will be used whilst a clinical procedure is being carried out, so the child can be entertained and distracted. For children who are more-able, sessions take place in communal areas to encourage children to get out of their beds, where appropriate, and participate in play-based, choice and decision-making songs.

Our specially developed interactive songs and singing games help with deeper breathing, stimulation of the brain, movement, personal and social skills; with the objective of enabling development of coping mechanisms to the hospital environment and their illnesses.

Singing is an exceptionally powerful and special activity for wellbeing and health. Singing reduces cortisol and feelings of isolation and stress and releases the body's natural opioids & hormones associated with wellbeing. Our singing-play, within Singing Medicine is tailored very specifically for each and every patient.

We aim to make a difference to children and special moments have included children speaking for the first time following a coma or smiling for the first time in weeks.

When COVID hit, we felt it important to continue to support hospital project beneficiaries as much as possible, as they have been more isolated than ever with restrictions on hospital visits and staff wearing facemasks. We were fortunate to agree some changes in the use of the restricted reserves we were holding to support many new digital activities:

Since March 2020, we have made c.300 short, interactive singing films for children, available for free on our new YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ExCathedraSingingMedicine/videos>

We stream weekly on Facebook Live, offering interactive Singing Medicine sessions every Friday: <https://m.facebook.com/SingingMedicine/>

In June 2020, we released a virtual-choir singing-film we made of children at Birmingham Children's Hospital. In an extraordinary piece of timing, Ex Cathedra Vocal Tutors were working with Singing Medicine patients and Birmingham Children's Hospital Chaplaincy Team before anyone had heard of coronavirus, to create what is thought to be the world's first hospital-wide children and young people's virtual patient choir, called the **Lifting Spirits Choir**.



This first film, the incredibly-moving piece, entitled **'Music Inside'** was released at the beginning of June; it has had 40,000+ views and a play on BBC Radio 3.

https://youtu.be/l_56CxtAsXE

'When the Singing Medicine team arrive on the ward it is like turning a light on'

Chaplain, Birmingham Children's Hospital

Whilst we cannot currently make physical bedside visits, we still work very closely with the hospital staff and are currently creating **'Singing Postcards'**: these short interactive singing-films are made on requests from doctors, nurses and physiotherapists for particular individual children, who need additional intervention – we ensure they include favourite activities, and tasks children have (e.g. finishing sentences, or squeezing fingers) as per their care plan. The films are enjoyable and accessible (use their names, home language and capabilities) and are supportive of the work their play therapists are doing with them. We even recently made a Singing Postcard for the family of child who was due to have life support removed, the film was made to aid the family with memory making about a teddy singing with their child.

Outcomes

- 1: Children in hospital experience improved well-being through positive and inclusive interactive songs and singing games
- 2: Children in hospital have a voice and are enabled to make decisions through singing-play
- 3: Children in hospital develop their personal, social and education skills
- 4: Children are enabled to sing together and have fun with their family, other children and hospital staff, reducing the isolation they may feel in hospital

As demonstrated within this report, we have met all the outcomes above with 'in-person' activities from January – March 2020, and digitally online since, not missing one single Friday, even during the height of the Covid pandemic.

Each week, on a Friday (as is usual) we continue to 'meet' albeit online and work alongside hospital staff, including consultants, nurses, play specialists, physios, and teachers during Singing Medicine sessions - the play-therapists on the wards gather the patients to join in with our Facebook Live sessions, connect with our YouTube videos and now also access individual films made especially for particularly poorly children (see Q2) who are sent personal 'postcards' as per their care plan.

Singing Medicine enables children to participate in activity they wouldn't otherwise have access to – they can play and be themselves, forget about their treatment for a short time, and have fun.

The songs encourage children to use their imaginations and memories to connect with life outside the hospital, for example, in one singing game the child chooses the day of the week and activity so they might sing, "On Monday morning Callum woke up... I'd like to go to the park today...".

The physical act of singing itself also improves mood and well-being, increases relaxation, and reduces physical and emotional stress through the release of oxytocin (human bonding feel-good hormone), reduction of cortisol, and the deeper breathing that is required.

When children are participating in Singing Medicine, they are distracted from the stressful hospital environment and feel happier, calmer, and more relaxed. They sing, interact, play and have fun with Vocal Tutors [on screen when virtual], their family, other children and hospital staff.

Very often though, it is a wonderful distraction technique. In one example last year, a physiotherapist was at bedside with [name redacted] in paediatric intensive care removing fluid from the child's lungs with a suction pipe down her throat. She asked us to sing soothing songs using a puppet dancing around to distract the patient from this highly unpleasant and uncomfortable procedure.

Other examples are:

“She’s so chilled from that. And her heart rate calmed right down. Look at the monitor! It happened right when you were singing.”

Mum

“A child in a lot of pain and distress was offered painkillers and then calmed down so much during the singing session, that they were not necessary at that time.” Nurse

“Music has been helpful for us to get closer to him because at one point he pushed us away...Singing Medicine gave us the chance to do something together again as a family.” Parent

“My patient is very down. I have told her she must do some Singing Medicine today.” Dr

“My patient’s heart rate needs increasing to increase their oxygen saturation rate, please will you do some stimulating singing play with them.”

Nurse

“My patient was in a lot of pain. I offered them pain relief medication or Singing Medicine and they chose Singing Medicine and for the rest of the afternoon, they did not require pain relief medication.”

Dr

“Thank you, you’re keeping us going through this awful time – can’t wait to see you and your purple t-shirts back on the wards very soon, we (all) miss you!” Parent

New work:

The Admissions Department at Birmingham Children’s Hospital has requested that we make some films for children to ease their worries about going into hospital, again so that all children can access them – we intend to utilise our very own special Noah Bear to tell the story of when ‘he’ goes to hospital...

We have recently created a high-quality, cuddly, Singing Medicine teddy bear called Noah Bear, to enable comforting singing-play with isolated children, to soothe and calm them (our ‘Music Inside’ song plays when you press his tummy). Our Vocal Tutors sing with him each week, which is why we have launched a campaign to encourage businesses to Buy-a-Bear, so that each child on every ward can have their very own Singing Medicine Noah Bear to sing along with each Friday.



Lessons learned

Planning, reporting, recording and evaluation are crucial to the success of our singing sessions with patients. Built into the day these sessions enable the team to reflect together upon the feedback they constantly actively seek from staff, families and patients in order to develop the most appropriate, supportive and enjoyable singing-play sessions they can. We must be highly sensitive to patient needs, capabilities, and emotions, as well as that of the family. We must be highly tuned into how we can be supportive and helpful to staff rather than 'in the way'.

However, we still had to learn very quickly when the pandemic hit, many of the team were not used to the audio-visual materials, backing tracks up in Dropbox folders for example, as well as exploring new ways of performing to camera, whilst also getting to grips with all the new technical equipment wasn't easy – and in the very beginning, all at home on their own.

Nonetheless, with a lot of trial and error, we succeeded in overcoming all those difficulties, and have since been able to utilise professional film services, production and editing (safely and within guidelines) to work from Vada Recording Studios when possible.

We have developed successful ways of recording songs in a way that captures how it would be in a live situation; the songs and singing games are interactive and require children to make decisions to complete the songs - leaving gaps for children to sing in their choices, follow musical instructions,

sing the answers to our call and response/question and answer songs, and sing partner songs with our Vocal Tutors.

Under 'normal' circumstances, patients attending hospital would benefit from free 'in person' activity on a weekly basis, with free Singing Medicine CDs to take home, so they can continue to access our services. Until we can resume our 'in-person' activities, all our projects are now available digitally and are free to access, so all young children and their families (however isolated) can access our online channels, in lieu of physical bedside visits. The hospital is hoping we can return to the wards to deliver 'in person' activities by spring/summer 2020 – COVID restrictions permitting.

The Future:

From the success of our digital work, we are developing a **Singing Medicine** website (we are looking to launch in March 2021) where interactive singing films and audio tracks will be available for all participants for an unlimited time. Our high-quality films and audio tracks have been expertly made in Vada Recording Studios and by our specialist film-maker; in fact, our online work has just won the Community Award in the Classical Music Digital Awards in December 2020.



Birmingham Children's Hospital Charities (BCH) were originally major sponsors of our Singing Medicine programme, but unfortunately, due to the pandemic, they now find themselves unable to fund us any longer, so we are now looking for a new grantor to replace these funds lost to us.

We are fortunate to have confirmed funding currently from Masonic Charitable Foundation, Oak Foundation, S & D Lloyd Charity, Arts Society Birmingham, The Provincial Grand Lodge of Warwickshire Freemasons and The National Lottery Community Fund - but we fall short of being able to deliver the full benefits of the programme without Birmingham Children's Charities, which is why we are seeking assistance from other sources.

External communications and website.

We continue to collect 'golden moments' and 'golden quotes' and periodically we undertake case studies. In 2019 Dr Carolyn Blackburn of Birmingham City University undertook a research project (funded by yourselves) on Singing Medicine:

<https://journals.rcni.com/nursing-children-and-young-people/evidence-and-practice/family-members-perceptions-of-a-singing-medicine-project-in-a-childrens-hospital-ncyp.2019.e1241/abs>

Research conducted by Dr Carolyn Blackburn from Birmingham City University (2019) found:
"...participating in Singing Medicine provides health, wellbeing and emotional benefits for children, their families and the NHS professionals working in the hospital. It contributes to children's learning and development (including neurodevelopment), family relationships and experiences of their hospital stay, provides a distraction from pain and discomfort, and provides positive memories for families if the worst happens and children do not recover."

We are also part of the Birmingham Music Education Partnership in which music inclusion and special needs is an ongoing agenda item; in this group we share our learning together.

We have continued to identify opportunities to present at relevant local, regional and national events (albeit online), sharing best practice and learning via various networks and partnerships:

Radio:

<https://youtu.be/vKFHlAdzDco> featuring three of our Vocal Tutors

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01nt2ch> interview with Rebecca Ledgard (Director of Education and lead on Singing Medicine) and Sally Spencer, Oncology Nurse and Singing Medicine Vocal Tutor

Press:

<https://opening-night.org/2020/12/09/interview-rebecca-ledgard-talks-noah-bear-and-singing-medicine/>

<http://birmingham.livingmag.co.uk/singing-medicine/>

<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/news/blog/guest-blog-childrens-choir-combats-isolation-aids-mental-health-young-patients-birmingham>

We've also had phenomenal responses to all our Twitter, Instagram and Facebook feeds throughout the year, but especially during the pandemic surge with online engagement - including this wonderful film of the High Sheriff of the West Midlands, Michael Kuo, PhD FRCS DCH, ENT specialist, singing a lovely Christmas song with our own Noah Bear: <https://youtu.be/-tmlGgKI1dI>



Michael Kuo
[@theENTclinic](https://twitter.com/theENTclinic)



Please support [@singingmed](https://twitter.com/singingmed) many thanks to [@VadaRecording](https://twitter.com/VadaRecording)
pic.twitter.com/ArncqwJBP7

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We ran a very successful Singing Medicine Story Competition, for all children in hospital and throughout all primary schools for key stage 1 and 2 students, featuring Noah Bear... "The day the singing stopped, the world fell silent and the only voice that could be heard was Noah's." For details of the winning entries, see <https://excathedra.co.uk/lets-make-a-story-the-winners/> - plus there are a lot of other news articles and reviews available on our website that can be accessed here: <https://excathedra.co.uk/news-and-media/>.

Our own graduate Scholarship students and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire students got the opportunity to shadow Vocal Tutors before the pandemic, but unfortunately have not had the chance (due to Covid restrictions) to engage in activity since the end of March.

Socials:

W: www.excathedra.co.uk/education-participation/singing-medicine/

F: www.facebook.com/SingingMedicine

T: @singingmed

I: @excathedrasingingmedicine