

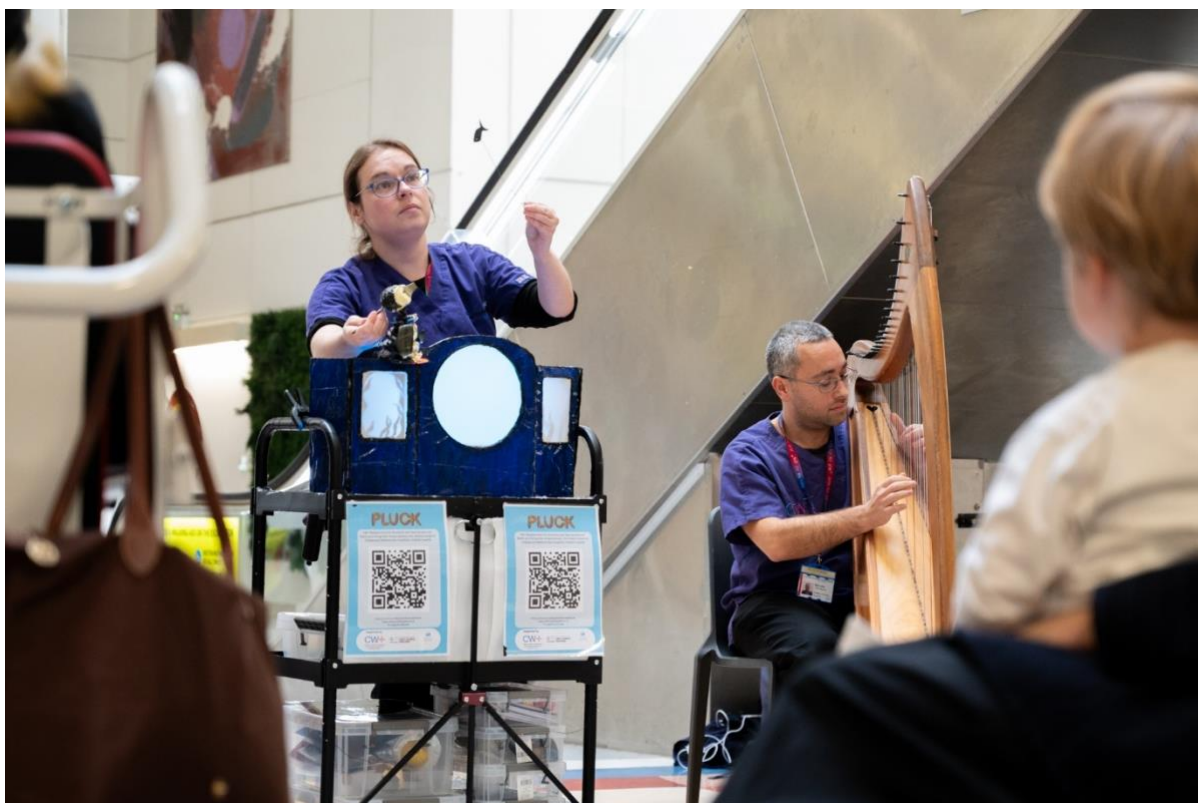


'PLUCK' – HARP AND PUPPETRY FOR PAEDIATRIC PATIENTS

EVALUATION SUMMARY

Andrew Hall, Head of Impact and Evaluation, CW+

November 2024



The evaluation in numbers:

31

Performances

74

Children reached

83

Adults reached

87%

of children appeared completely engaged by the performance

97%

of parents appeared completely engaged by the performance

‘The space was actually transformed. It became another place. It became not their bedroom in some way, not their hospital ward, bedroom, cubicle, whatever. It was something else because they entered into a different world.’

Cariad Astles, Subject Leader for Puppetry at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and Programme Lead for MA Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Plymouth Marjon University.



Context

Chelsea and Westminster Hospital offers a wide range of children's services, including a specialist children's Emergency Department. It is the lead centre for specialist paediatric and neonatal surgery in north-west London, performing the most complex surgeries on babies and children. The hospital has recently undergone significant redevelopment to enhance its children's wards, and benefits from state-of-the-art children's operating theatres, a dedicated paediatric dental theatre and a Paediatric Assessment Centre. The service is overseen by West London Children's Healthcare, one of London's largest providers of children's services, which cares for more than 150,000 children a year.

The challenge

A hospital admission can be a stressful experience for children and their families, and has the potential to significantly impact their wellbeing through emotional distress and anxiety, especially in younger patients.

Arts-based participatory activities have emerged as a valuable tool in paediatric healthcare settings, offering a range of benefits that enhance the overall wellbeing of young patients. A recent systematic review of research in this area¹ highlighted the potential of creative or play-based activities to reduce children's levels of anxiety, pain and negative emotions. In this review, 13 out of 14 studies that examined the impact on paediatric anxiety showed evidence of a reduction compared with a control group, and four out of six studies investigating levels of pain also showed improvements. As well as improving the experience of patients and their families, research has suggested that these reductions in anxiety and pain can also lead to improved efficiencies through reduced procedural time.

The project

Harpist Mark Levin and puppeteer Joni-Rae Carrack have been collaborating since 2021, performing calming mini sensory shows using shadow puppets and live harp music for patients and their families across the paediatric wards at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (CWFT). 'Pluck' has been their first specific project, which has aimed to develop the artists' collaboration, create original theatre work, engage patients with creativity, and enhance patient wellbeing.

The six-month project has involved a rolling process of research, creating performances, showings to patients, and redevelopment. Although the artists have been working at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital for some years, this project offered some key differences and opportunities compared to their usual work. These included:

- having extensive time and space to rehearse, and to develop original stories and music
- being able to create different styles of puppets (that take longer to make)

¹ Signorelli, C., Robertson, E. G., Valentin, C., Alchin, J. E., & Treadgold, C. (2023). A Review of Creative Play Interventions to Improve Children's Hospital Experience and Wellbeing. *Hospital Pediatrics*, 13(11), e355-e364.



- exploring different types of story to suit different children depending on their age and needs (in particular, an emphasis on creating a performance that would appeal to adolescent patients)

A period of development led to the creation of five new shows, each with bespoke puppets and music, as well as accompanying printed resources that could be left with patients following a performance. **31 performances** were delivered to patients and families on the paediatric wards of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, across **10 hospital visits**. They reached **71 children** (patients), **83 adults** (such as parents and carers), and three siblings of patients.

Most performances were in single-occupancy side rooms, although they also took place in double-occupancy rooms, multi-bed bays, a playroom and an outpatient waiting area. Similarly, most performances were to individual patients and families, although performances in the outpatient area reached many more.

Around three-quarters of performances were between 10 and 30 minutes in length, with an average length of 16 minutes for performances in the side rooms, bays and the playroom. Performances in the outpatients waiting area tended to be longer, with an average of 38 minutes, and one performance of 60 minutes.





The results

To understand the impact of this project, we undertook an evaluation that included an artists' log (n=31), an online feedback survey for parents/carers (n=8), and one phone interview with the parent of a patient. In addition to this, one of the project sessions was observed by Cariad Astles, Subject Leader for Puppetry at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and Programme Lead, MA Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Plymouth Marjon University. Cariad also provided mentoring for the project with support from Arts Council England.

The key outcomes of the project were: distraction from the clinical environment for children; improved mood for children, adults and siblings; and providing a period of respite for adults caring for children.



Distraction from the clinical environment for children was a key outcome from the project. The artists reported that **children appeared completely engaged in 87% of the performances**, and somewhat engaged in a further 10%. This was also reported in the parent/carer feedback surveys, where one respondent described how their child had been so engaged that they also wanted to draw their parent's attention to the performance:

'My daughter was playing with a toy and then pointed, "Mommy, look!"'

The results suggest that this engagement led to improved mood and relaxation. In the parent/carer survey, six of the eight respondents said the performance led their child to feel much better, and two somewhat better. Furthermore, seven (23%) of the artists' performance logs specifically mentioned patients visibly relaxing or settling during the performance. The comments below are examples of this, taken from the artists' reflections on different performances:

'They said they had never seen the baby settle and focus so much, and were very visibly moved by the session.'

'Mum said it was the calmest he had been all day, and it had been a long day and night for them.'

'The Play Team told us he was hard to engage before we went in, but he watched the show and seemed to relax with it.'



The adults who provided feedback also alluded to other benefits for children. In an interview, one parent reflected that the performance had helped her child remain calm:

'She wasn't nervous going to the doctor, but [the performance] helped her to remain calm, and there was even an element of fun.'

Similarly, a written comment in one of the survey responses mentions how the performance helped to introduce a fun aspect to the hospital visit:

'My daughter enjoyed it so much, and was able to link something fun to have in a not fun place.'

Cariad Astles reflected on the potential for the performance to transform the clinical space into something new:

'It was also about the magic. And that's something that really struck me as well when I was watching them – the space was actually transformed. It became another place. It became not their bedroom, not their hospital ward, cubicle, whatever. It was something else because they entered into a different world.'

A thematic analysis of the artists' performance log notes highlights some key aspects of the performances that seemed particularly impactful:

- Babies often enjoyed the interplay of light and shadow.

'The baby reacted most to the shadows and lights and was attentive throughout.'

- Children enjoyed getting close up to the 3D models.

'Baby watched very intently and mother seemed very engaged too. Especially liked 3D puppets coming closer.'

- Children and adults enjoyed the harp music, including when played on its own while the puppetry was being set up.

'She also enjoyed Disney songs on the harp between sessions and her mum really engaged too.'

- Children and adults enjoyed getting to ask questions and find out more about both the puppets and harp.

'The boy asked lots of questions about how the puppets were made, as did the parents about the work and the harp, and the boy said, "I've always wanted to see a harp played".'



Engagement and improved mood for adult parents or carers was another key outcome of the project, and in the artists' logs **adults were estimated to be completely engaged in 97% of performances**. In the one performance where this was not the case, the parent had seen the performance previously but still valued the visit from the artists:

'The mum had a few minutes on her phone as she has seen us already. She was thankful and very happy to have us back, and seemed relieved to have a minute to herself as we performed.'

Seven of the eight respondents strongly agreed that the performance had given them a period of respite from care, and six of the eight survey respondents said the performance made them feel 'much better', with the remaining two saying 'somewhat better'. Two respondents commented directly on this:

'It was a lovely performance that took me away from my rushed journey in public transport.'

'As you can appreciate it is excruciating for a parent to see their child in the hospital, and by providing these shows you make the child and also the parent smile and forget even for few minutes where they are.'

In a free-text response within the survey, **six of the eight respondents described the performance as either relaxing or calming**. Other responses are shown in the word cloud below.



Another outcome resulting from the performance in the outpatients' waiting area was reported to be a general calming of the atmosphere in that area. A comment from the parent interview suggested this had been the case:



'We walked in there were no kids crying... I do remember thinking: gosh, there are so many people here, but nobody was crying. But there was some type of noise, and I'm like, "what is that sound?" And then I realised that it was the two artists. All the kids were attentive, whether engaging with them or just doing their own thing. But you know, having them in the background, it was really nice. It was different in a really good way.'

This shift in the atmosphere of the waiting area was also alluded to in comments from the artists' performance log:

'Lots of children came to watch and chairs were arranged as small audience, some watched both before and after their appointments and others dipped in and out.'

'Very attentive families. One mum filmed on her phone, another family were very interested too, and then we had a long chat with a family who saw a little bit but then were called into his appointment. He came to find us again at the end.'

Future developments

There are potential areas of development for future evaluations of this and similar projects. For example, some research studies have shown a reduction in procedural time for patients in the presence of arts-based activities. In this pilot, there was one documented occasion where a medical observation took place while the artists were with the patient, as shown in this comment in the performance log:

'A consultant came and listened to the boy's back with a stethoscope during the show, and he didn't flinch at all, he kept on focused on the performance – the staff seemed to use the show as an opportunity to make the observations, she then chatted to the mum, so the show gave them space to chat.'

A future evaluation could consider the time saving for clinical staff in such a situation.

Conclusion

The Pluck project has been effective in engaging both children and adults, providing a distraction and period of respite in what can be an otherwise stressful experience. The performances also had a transformative effect on the spaces in which they took place, creating a calm atmosphere and potentially facilitating clinical work.

The evaluation has revealed useful insights into specific elements of performances, and how these can be effective for engaging different age groups. Future evaluations or research projects could build on this by exploring the positive impacts on clinical staff from such performances.

For more information on Pluck, see <https://www.plucktheatre.co.uk/>.