

Speech: The power of the arts and social activities to improve the nation's health

I love my job. I get to see brilliant doctors and inspirational nurses, courageous paramedics and committed carers. I get to meet people who save lives each and every day.

Yet, there were some perks to being Culture Secretary. You'd get to go to the Tate, the National, the Royal Opera House for work. You'd get to rub shoulders with the likes of Grayson Perry, Anthony Gormley and even the legendary Ronnie Wood.

Although, when Ronnie offered me a little pick-me-up at the Brits, I was surprised, and mightily relieved, when he handed me a mini Babybel.

"Minister caught in cheese scandal" isn't quite a career ending headline.

We know what the NHS does is life-saving. But what the arts and social activities do is life-enhancing. You might get by in a world without the arts, but it isn't a world that any of us would choose to live in.

As the great Chinese philosopher Confucius said: "Music produces a kind of pleasure, which human nature cannot do without."

And as the great Rolling Stones said: "I can't get no, oh, no, no, no, I can't get no satisfaction."

Music and the arts aren't just the foods of love. They're not just right in their own terms as the search for truth and expression of the human condition.

We shouldn't only value them for the role they play in bringing meaning and dignity to our lives. We should value the arts and social activities because they're essential to our health and wellbeing.

And that's not me as a former Culture Secretary saying it. It's scientifically proven. Access to the arts and social activities improves people's mental and physical health. It makes us happier and healthier.

So that's what I want to talk about today: how we can harness the incredible power of the arts and social activities to improve the nation's health and wellbeing.

How the arts and social activities can help us move to more person-centred care and a focus on prevention as much as cure. And how social prescribing can shape our health and social care system in the future.

First: the power of the arts and social activities.

Now, I must pay tribute to Ed Vaizey for all his work in this field, and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing for their Creative Health report, which applied some much needed rigorous analysis to the research.

And what they found is:

- the arts and social activities can help keep us well, aid our recovery, and support longer lives better lived
- the arts and social activities can help meet major challenges facing health and social care – ageing, loneliness, mental health, and other long-term conditions
- and, the arts and social activities can help save money for the NHS and social care system

One project, a collaboration between the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Hull's stroke recovery service, used music sessions to help people after they'd had a stroke.

And what they found is through learning to play instruments, trying conducting, and eventually performing as part of an orchestra, nearly 90% of stroke patients felt better physically, with fewer dizzy spells and epileptic seizures, less anxiety, improved sleep, improved concentration and memory, better morale and more confidence.

That was just one study. Others across the country have seen similar successes.

In Lambeth, in south London, The Alchemy Project used dance as an early intervention against psychosis. The young people, who worked with dance experts, showed major improvements in concentration, communication, and wellbeing.

In Gloucestershire, hospitals are now referring patients with lung conditions to singing sessions. Sounds counter-intuitive? But no. Singing helps people, even with chronic lung conditions.

In my home county of Cheshire, Halton has now created a "Cultural Manifesto for Wellbeing". Sounds grandiose, but it's simple ideas like connecting school choirs to every local care home in the borough.

Simple ideas like the Southbank Centre using working poets to run a poetry course for people with dementia and their families.

Or the music therapy charity Nordoff Robbins, which helps children with autism communicate, people with dementia feel less anxious, and provided comfort to people facing terminal illness. Last year alone, they helped

almost 8,000 people.

So those are just some of the examples of how the arts have benefited health. And we must remember this is still a very new medical field. Social prescribing only really started about 5 years ago.

Just the other day, Canada announced that it was going to start prescribing free museum visits to patients. Well, we're lucky enough to have some of the world's best museums for free, here in London.

But we need to ensure that the people who may benefit most, are aware of what's available and that they're accessible.

As Culture Secretary, one of the biggest challenges remains to change the perception of the arts as elitist or inaccessible, something I know is a personal priority for the new Culture Secretary Jeremy Wright.

And, I think this is a challenge we also have to overcome with arts and health and social prescribing. The arts are for everyone. And what pleased me most about Lord Howarth's work with the APPG, what had the biggest positive effect, the common theme running through all the creative fields from literature, to music, to art is: personal creativity.

Taking part. Having a go. Dusting off forgotten skills. Or learning new ones.

So social prescribing isn't about prescribing tickets to Hamilton or seeing a Titian at the National Gallery, as fun as they both may be. It's about what's right for you. What fits.

Don't like opera? Fine. The doctor isn't going to force you to sit through 17 hours of Wagner's Ring Cycle. Unless that doctor happens to be Michael Gove.

It's about what works for you. How you can participate in the arts to improve your health. It's about moving from patient-centred care to person-centred care. Stopping people from becoming patients in the first place. Which is the second thing I want to talk about today.

Right now, my department is working with the NHS to draw up a long-term plan for the future of our health and social care system.

The reasons are twofold:

- we're putting a record £20.5 billion extra a year into the NHS over the next 5 years, so we have to ensure we get the best possible return, and every penny of taxpayer's money is well spent
- and, society is changing – we're living longer, our needs are becoming more complex, our expectations of public services are growing; at least 20% of GP consultations are now due to things like housing, employment and relationship breakdowns

Now, those things may appear unrelated to health, but they're not. It's why yesterday I launched a new focus on prevention for our health and social care system. It's one of my top 3 priorities, along with technology and workforce.

Because if we want to get prevention right, we must move to person-centred care. And this is how we do it:

- by giving people the knowledge, skills and confidence to take responsibility for their own health
- by using new digital technologies to help people make informed decisions, work with healthcare professionals, to choose the services they need, when they need them

So, I see social prescribing as fundamental to prevention. And I see prevention as fundamental to the future of the NHS.

For too long we've been fostering a culture that's popping pills and Prozac, when what we should be doing is more prevention and perspiration.

Social prescribing can help us combat over-medicalising people. Of dishing out drugs when it isn't what's best for the patient. And it won't solve their problem.

Social prescribing is a tool that doctors can use to help them, help patients and help the NHS cut waste.

It's the Goldilocks approach to medication: the right amount at the right time. No more, no less.

So under my vision for prevention, I see social prescribing growing in importance, becoming an indispensable tool for GPs, just like a thermometer or a stethoscope may be seen today.

And, together with a greater focus on diet, exercise, stopping smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, and greater mental health support, how we move to more person-centred care, and build a health and social care system for the future.

So, finally, let me turn to the social prescribing ideas that we're looking at together with the Arts Council and DCMS.

First, social prescribing through libraries. There are nearly 3,000 libraries in England. Many of them already do great work in helping people become better informed patients so they can better manage their own health.

What we're looking at is if more libraries can offer health services, and if we can expand the existing health services libraries already offer.

Norfolk's Healthy Libraries Initiative is a great example of libraries being used for stop smoking and healthy living sessions.

But if we can connect even more libraries to GP surgeries and primary and community care services, and increase training for librarians on social prescription referrals, then we could reach even more people, and make libraries even more vital and valued to their local communities.

So things like: dance classes for elderly people, choirs for loneliness and mental health reading groups. Using our libraries and librarians to intervene earlier and improve public health.

Second, we're looking at how music can help people with dementia. How it can reduce the need for medication. How it can reduce agitation and combative behaviour. How it can reduce the need for restraints and help people with dementia, and their families, cope better with symptoms.

And I must pay tribute to the pioneering work of the charity Playlist for Life. Their work creating personal playlists for people with dementia led to a 60% reduction in the need for psychotropic medication at one care home.

This is the kind of cheap, easy-to-use social prescription that I'm fully behind. Because dementia is one of the major health challenges we face for the future. The number of people with dementia is set to rise from 850,000 today to more than a million in less than a decade. Personal playlists could offer a simple solution to this growing problem.

And third, we will create a National Academy for Social Prescribing to be the champion of, build the research base, and set out the benefits of social prescribing across the board, from the arts to physical exercise, to nutritional advice and community classes. A resource which GPs and other frontline health workers can draw on for guidance and expertise. Where they can learn what works, and what's available in their communities.

Because social prescription reduces over subscription of drugs. It can lead to the same or better outcomes for patients without popping pills. And it saves the NHS money, because many of these social cures are cheaper or free.

Now, drug companies may not like that. And you can bet this multi-billion pound industry will use every tool at their disposal to lobby for the status quo and convince us drugs are better than free social cures. That's why we need a National Academy for Social Prescribing to be a champion for non-drug treatments. And it's the role of the state to sponsor the treatments that are often cheaper, better for patients, and better for society.

Now, I remain open to any idea. I'm not wedded to any one model. What's most important is what's proven to work. And my department will work with NHS trusts, providers, staff and with colleagues from DCMS and Arts Council England, so we can share our expertise and learn from each other.

Social prescription is about making better use of what we already have. About making the arts and social activities more accessible.

We're the country of Shakespeare, The Beatles, Harry Potter and Harry Kane's right foot.

But we're also a country of community choirs, reading circles and the Bury St Edmond's Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society, which you'll find in my wonderful constituency of West Suffolk.

People coming together. Taking part in arts and social activities, getting involved in something that's good for our health and good for society.

Arts, social activities and health in action. Life saving, life enhancing, making life worth living. So let's work together to make it happen.