

## Guidance Notes

### A Brief History

“Poems for the Waiting Room” was piloted through 1998 in health sites across Inner London. The scheme’s purpose was to explore the potential role and value of poetry in the healthcare environment. Funding was provided by the Poetry Society’s Poetry Places scheme and by the King’s Fund.

Poems selected by a group of care professionals were distributed to interested health sites in the region. The selecting panel was supported by the Poetry Society and included Social Workers, Health Visitors and Health Centre Administrators.

The poems selected for the pilot are presently being prepared for the printer in a new format and can soon be supplied on request. A similar range and choice to those available from “Poems on the Underground,” they are attractively presented on ordinary sheets of A4 paper. They are copyright cleared and where appropriate give acknowledgements to the publishers. They carry the logos of the sponsoring bodies.

The pilot was successful and the idea was well received. It attracted national publicity and various health bodies and centers around the country adopted the idea.

In 1999 the Arts Council supplied funding to enable the poet David Hart and myself to commission new work from 50 contemporary poets on waiting room themes. At the same time, the King’s Fund has now provided a further two years’ funding to enable the scheme further to develop, both in terms of collecting suitable poems and distributing them more widely. The 50 new poems are now ready for distribution and further collections are on the way.

### Criteria for Poem Selection

The selection of poems has been careful, and we are intent on monitoring continuously people’s responses to the poems to make sure we get it right. However, people interested in trying out the collection for themselves must also feel free to leave out or discard poems that strike them as unsuitable or ineffective.

The criteria that have been used in the selection process include the following:

that the poems be accessible, short and clear ; that they be of a quality that the panel is confident speaks effectively to the experience of their audience. (except when commissioning, the panel is not equipped to evaluate unpublished work or assist in publishing it).

that the poems take account of the waiting room situation ; the poems should therefore not be too disturbing or too direct in dealing with powerful personal themes. At the same time they should not be patronisingly jolly and they should not collude with denial.

that the poems should tend to affirm self, an individual's personal experience, in a context and era which for many feels depersonalising and belittling.

### Copyright Issues

So far, no publisher has asked for payment, but all poems still in copyright need the publisher's permission before being displayed. This process can be slow and several publishers need chasing up. Copyright law is complex and if and as the project continues to develop, further attention will need to be given to the copyright issue, in terms both of displaying poems on walls and sending them out on the Internet.

### Findings and suggestions on how to display the poems

There needs to be an allocated person at each site willing and positively interested to take charge of the poem collection and to remember to change over the poems after the period agreed. The pilot project found that in most cases this person will tend to be a Receptionist or Administrator. But not always. The important criteria are that the person should have a real interest in the idea, and a work schedule that is not so frantic that the poem rotation gets forgotten.

Sites have extremely diverse client populations, are often large and complex, and workers there often have exciting ideas of their own for how to use the poems. Several people wanted a whole range of poems up at any one time - in their staff sitting rooms, in children's clinics, in the sitting room walls of neighbouring old people's homes, even the sitting room walls of clients' own homes.

Furthermore, sites vary greatly in how they can display the poems. In some, one is not allowed to use the walls for display ; in others the space is too small for a large poster to make sense ; in yet others a small sheet of A4 gets lost among all the notices and small print.

For these reasons it was decided to lay out the collection simply and on ordinary paper, to give maximum flexibility to Health professionals on site on how to display them.

It was also decided to make the poem collection much larger than originally planned, and more catholic. The collections now coming through are large in number and are ethnically rich and varied.

Here are some ways of displaying the poems that have been tried out successfully in various sites :

The poems are magnified to A3 size on the photocopier and displayed in picture frames bought for the purpose (from the nearest branch of Athena ?) They are changed over every month or so.

The A4 poems are laminated and put up on the wall or on notice-boards in clusters of four or five to attract attention and provide some variety ; these too are replaced every month or so.

Individual A4 poems are put in angled perspex display frames that stand on tables in the waiting room.

The whole collection of A4 poems is put together in ring binder files and left in the waiting room for patients to leaf through.

### Management and Supervision

Poems for the Waiting Room is one of the projects managed and supervised by a charity called Hyphen- 21. Other projects supported by the charity include : “Morale in Care Services” a paper that sets out a detailed strategy for improving staff morale across care organisations ; Shared Care recording, which gives patients (or their carers) ownership of their own records and a means by which care professionals can better co-ordinate their practice ; and a code of professional conduct for ward rounds and similar meetings, with a view to making these meetings less intimidating for patients. The charity’s web-site can be found at : [www.charts.force9.co.uk](http://www.charts.force9.co.uk)

*Notes by Rogan Wolf*