

Analysis of what patients say during music therapy sessions: an explorative study

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Introduction: Some patients hospitalised in palliative care units receive music therapy at the bedside. They often express positive sentiments (Oppert 2012). However, do they consider it a musical interlude, time for relaxation, pleasure, or distraction from the present moment? On a deeper level, could music therapy reach out to the person in all its human vitality, its search for unity, its aspiring to beauty, an existential window?

Method:

A retrospective, exploratory study by a music therapist/cellist intervening weekly for 4 years, in collaboration with the care team, in the palliative care unit. Study concerned 357 patients; combined total of 478 sessions. Average age 75 years (25-102), 80% oncological, 10% neurological; 20% dementia, 5% psychotic. Precise language used by patients to describe their experience was recorded respecting words and terms enunciated. The entire corpus was analysed in units of meaning and collated thematically.

Results:

First results show 90% of patients evoked themes of “beauty”, “wellness”, “goodness”, describing the motions of “life”, “opening”, “unity”, “vibration”, “joy” and the impression of there being a connectedness “between their heart and their body”. Emotions such as pleasure, tranquillity, gentleness; also sadness, an inability to name, tearfulness perceived as an emotional outlet, a similarity with the human voice, a new capacity to experience their body, a feeling of inner energy, an inter-human communion, an opening to transcendence, existential dwelling in time and an evocation of death. The study will complete and clarify these data.

Perspectives

We aim to construct some anthropo-philosophical hypotheses taking account of the effect of music used therapeutically on seriously ill patients. We will base our study on the Greek concept *physis*, vital motion, reanimated by the elements of music. We will study the unifying dimension of music in the light of the disintegration attributable to the illness and suffering.