

## “The doctor is an artist”

Susan Byth

If you walked into my surgery in the inner-Brisbane suburb of Highgate Hill, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in an art gallery — paintings, my own works, hang on all the walls (Box 1). Am I a doctor? Am I an artist? I am both.

When I left high school, I thought seriously about studying art, but logic prevailed and I found myself with a medical degree. After 6 years at university in Brisbane and three years of hospital work in Townsville, I travelled to Europe. In Belgium, while walking one night in a moonlit field, I was momentarily aware of the presence

behind me of generations of European artists with whom I felt an intense personal affinity, including Michelangelo, El Greco, Vermeer, Van Gogh and Picasso. Perhaps it was the result of having immersed myself in art-filled galleries and churches; perhaps it was because I was so far from home. Whatever it was, I experienced a powerful sense of transcendence that took my breath away. And, for whatever reason, at that moment I felt very strongly that I would paint and would become known as an artist.

It took some time to realise this grand vision of mine. I studied fine art at Townsville TAFE and then Seven Hills College (now part of Griffith University) while working in various general practices. Then, I set about establishing my own practice and having four children. For 10 years, I drew and produced only occasional works. After I turned 40, everything changed, and I found myself fired by a passion that I felt almost powerless to control.

It was as if pictures had been accumulating inside me for years, and the backlog had reached a point where they had to be expressed. Each evening after work, when my family was in bed, I would begin painting — pouring my thoughts, visions and various “unconscious conclusions” onto canvas. I’d get by with little sleep — often three to four hours a night. It was one of the most stimulating and exhilarating times of my life. Painting energised me and charged my soul.

Over the next 10 years, I held 10 solo exhibitions in Brisbane and Sydney and painted eight minor series, as well as “one-offs” (Box 2). Over this same decade, I continued to work in my practice, finishing work around 2 pm and employing other doctors to see the rest of the patients. My concurrent practice of medicine gave me many ideas to use in my art. For example, a patient waxed lyrical about her nephew’s wedding just when I was painting some women in white dresses. I decided to make them the bridesmaids and my exhibition “Tying the knot” was born. Each painting in the exhibition represented something people might bring to a marriage, from company

1 My waiting-room (and art gallery)



and consolation, friendship and family, jealousy and acrimony, even alimony.

Because my nights were so creative, I was glad to be sensible Dr Byth by day. Earning money by practising medicine gave me the freedom to paint whatever I liked, as I did not have to necessarily sell paintings (although this happened). Having studied medicine and having to deal with the body and its function on a daily basis, I feel at ease with the artistic “discussion” of the flesh, sex and sexuality, and I’ve used this knowledge freely in some of my exhibitions. Being a doctor adds credibility to this art-

work, and even humour. After seeing my exhibition about the uterus, fertility and the power of female sexuality (“Up front, On uterus”), a patient joked as she had her Pap smear done: “So, whose cervix are you painting tonight, Dr Byth?”

My love and practice of art has helped me become aware of the broader social picture in medicine. “Normalising” illness, helping patients to become focused on good health outcomes and minimising the impact of setbacks have been some of my main patient management tactics in general practice. I know that painting provides me with relaxation at the end of a hard day’s work. It’s therapeutic for this doctor.

When I begin each canvas, I have no idea what I will be painting. But I know that I’m a logical person; capable of working something from A to B — I guess this is the bedrock of medicine. Similarly, a painting represents thousands of small decisions (brushstrokes), each one dictated by what has gone before. Each and every painting “happens” when I am lost in this open-ended process. I paint almost

2 Night duty



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