

# create

Perspectives on the value  
of art and culture



## Jan Burkhardt

Dance – a cure for the sitting disease?

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## **Public Health commissioner and dance and health specialist Jan Burkhardt asks if the nation can dance its way back into shape.**

Over the course of millions of years, humans evolved as moving beings – but in the last hundred years we have slowed down. Never in the history of mankind have people been so physically inactive as they are now. We have become a society afflicted with a ‘sitting disease’.

Physical inactivity is now the fourth largest cause of disease and disability. The average person in the UK spends almost four hours a day watching television and adults spend eight hours a day on media devices – more time than they sleep. On average children access five different media devices at home.

While digital media brings extraordinary opportunities, it has its side effects. Excessive screen time is linked to poor emotional wellbeing as well as physical health problems.

Public Health England has made physical inactivity a priority target. The challenge is to find engaging alternatives to the passive fun of television and electronic media, activity that gets people off their sofas. This is where the arts should come in – and where dance has so much to offer. Dance is a wonderfully social and creative way to be active. It has a wide following and it is brilliant exercise – but it goes further and emotionally deeper than that. The joy of dancing to music, the intimacy of dancing with a partner or the buzz of performing all inspire millions of people each year.

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**‘Dance participation can improve self-esteem and body image and reduce anxiety in children.’**



Research by the Scottish Government showed that those who participated in a creative or cultural activity were 38 per cent more likely to report good health compared to those who did not. For participants in dance, the figure reporting good health leapt to 62 per cent.

Dance is an especially popular and effective way to engage women and girls, which is important considering that they are less active than their male counterparts. Only 16 per cent of girls achieved the recommended hour of physical activity each day compared with 21 per cent of boys according to the Health Survey of England (2012). Girls are much less engaged with sport than boys.

But People Dancing surveys shows that the majority of the 4.8 million people who take part in dance each year in England are women and girls. Given the popularity of dance with women and girls, the dance sector should be a good partner for the public health sector. We are beginning to strengthen our links, but the dance sector needs to make the case for its ability to meet health outcomes.

Dance has a good story to tell, not only in terms of engaging women and girls. Children’s emotional wellbeing is a growing concern; the UK recently came 14th out of 15 countries in a survey on children’s emotional wellbeing (below South Africa and just ahead of South Korea). The Children’s Society is calling on the government to take measures to improve children’s wellbeing. In 2012 I published a systematic review with Dr Cathy Brennan on the effects of recreational dance on children’s health, showing evidence that dance participation can improve self-esteem and body image and reduce anxiety in children.



With an ageing population, dance can help address health priorities such as preventing falls and social isolation. Research is underway to see if dance may deliver better outcomes than standard falls prevention exercise programmes. More than 700,000 people in England now live with dementia. Evidence shows that physical activity can help prevent dementia, so dance programmes to keep older people active could play a key role. For those living with dementia, dance can be a medium for connection and empathy with loved ones and care givers, when language and cognition have failed.

The World Health Organisation's definition of health is 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. Public health is concerned with the health of the population as a whole. It focuses on prevention – which makes financial sense. Public health also targets inequalities in health. Despite our National Health Service, the gap between the health of the richest and poorest communities remains unacceptably large.

It's my view as a public health commissioner that the arts in general and dance in particular have a role to play in addressing this. Around the country, dance programmes have been effective at engaging disadvantaged communities. The health and arts sectors can work together to improve reach and provision for the disadvantaged, to the benefit of all.

When the New Economics Foundation reviewed the evidence on happiness and wellbeing for the Government, it identified five areas important to wellbeing: to connect with others; to be active; to take notice; to keep learning; and to give. Public health organisations have promoted these 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' and in some areas used them as a framework for commissioning. Recently, Carole Wood, Director of Public Health for Gateshead, said that dancing 'encompasses all five elements of the Five Ways to Wellbeing'.

**'For those living with dementia, dance can be a medium for connection and empathy with loved ones and care givers'**

Dance offers an emotionally and physically appealing alternative to the passive consumption of digital entertainment. By inspiring us to get off our sofas, it can make us healthier and happier and in turn build happier, healthier communities.

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*Arts Council England recognises that there is an increasing awareness of the ways in which arts and culture can contribute to our individual and collective wellbeing. We believe we need more research in this area. That's why we are committed to a research programme in partnership with leading academic institutions. You can find out more about this work on our blog.*

*Jan Burkhardt has 25 years of experience working in the dance sector and 10 years experience in the NHS and Leeds City Council as a Health Improvement Specialist. She developed and directed DAZL (Dance Action Zone Leeds), an award-winning dance and health programme. Recently she has led a strategic development programme bringing the dance and public health sectors together across London and Northern England.*



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