

Addiction and art

Edited by Patricia B Santora, Margaret L Dowell, Jack E. Henningfield. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2010. £15.50 (hb). 184pp. ISBN: 978-0801894817

At first glance this book would be more suited in an art gallery shop or maybe on someone's coffee table rather than in a practitioner's clinic or an academic's office. Three quarters of the book is of pictures of art and the accompanied explanation by the artist.

The book is written by three editors, Margaret L Dowell, Jack E Henningfield and Patricia B Santora. Both Ms Santora and Ms Henningfield come from a psychiatry background and teach out of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Ms Dowell is a professor of education and art. The book is divided into three chapters.

In the first chapter entitled, 'Cultivating the Visual Arts to Stimulate Insights into Addiction and Recovery' the editors explore firstly the significant economic and health impact addiction has on the United States and yet, states that "compared to other medical illnesses... addiction... receives little attention from the medical and public health communities". (p.2) The editors' opinion is that the main reason for this is a wrong understanding of it. "Addiction is neither a weakness nor a 'moral failing' deserving of punishment but, instead, a chronic medical illness requiring treatment" (p.4).

Using the example of HIV/AIDS, the editors' claim that the 'AIDS Memorial Quilt' led to a change in the public perspective and instilled a compassion that was transformed into a passion to help.

The editors' used this example to illustrate the way that science and art can complement one another in facilitating recovery.

"In treating addiction, art is as necessary as science because, if we do not have the passion to understand and to help, the science may go unused" (p.6).

The second chapter, 'How the Visual Arts Capture the Complexity of Addiction' mainly explained the editors' background in addiction and art and how they collected and chose the art featured in the book. The art in this book was selected

by a board made up of a mix of addiction scientists and art professionals. The 1,000 approximate art submissions were received following a response to a 'national call' to artists.

From these submission a total of 63 artworks were chosen for the book. Some of the criteria that the board used for picking the art were: credibility with the art and scientific community, ability to reach a wide audience and the art to be comprehensive in its coverage of the many aspects of addiction.

The third chapter is the main bulk of the book that covers the 63 different artworks by 57 artists who used a variety of media such as paintings, sculpture, drawings, photography, decorate arts and other artefacts. Each artwork is also complimented with a short description by the artist.

In the epilogue, the editors stated they hoped that the art in the book would inspire compassion for family and friends caught in addiction, hope that recovery is possible for those caught in addiction, motivation for policymakers to provide adequate funding and an overall better understanding of the human experience in this "treatable medical condition" (p.140).

Personally, looking at each of the artwork I did not find any one of them particularly impacting on me. However, the descriptions from the artists helped give me context and a greater appreciation for the messages in the art. I also enjoyed the editors' ideas of how science and art can complement each other in the first chapter and admire their efforts in trying to accomplish this.

My final thoughts is that this book may be of some use to public policy in giving them ideas for another 'string to their bow' in their approach to addiction. The book may also have some use in clinical work such as group work discussion. Or, this book may have a use in a waiting room in an addiction clinic or finally for experts and 'experts by experience' who may have a more artistic appreciation than me.

Scott Hill,

Mental Health Social Worker,
Mater Sector, Dublin North Central,
HSE, Ireland.

Email: scottnhill@gmail.com