

Deep Within: *drumming as a healing strategy*

by Barry Bittman, MD

From the very first time I participated in a drum circle, I recognized something profoundly moving about the experience.

It was far more than just delighting in the chance to make music together. My feelings intuitively struck a chord (if you don't mind the pun) that's still vibrating with excitement about music's yet unrealized potential as a healing strategy in healthcare. That day a door opened and beckoned me to enter a relatively uncharted territory with few roadmaps to guide the way.

The quest ahead seemed mysterious at first. While it's common knowledge that music had been one of the central healing strategies of antiquity, traditional medicine seems almost devoid of sound—healing sound that is. It was incongruous to compare music's widespread popularity as a relaxing pastime with the stark paucity of medical interventions that incorporate music. Even more surprising was the fact that most physicians play an instrument, yet few integrate healing sounds when they're needed the most.

Since the initial vibration of my first drumming circle never ceased (energy is neither created nor destroyed), I felt compelled to follow where music would lead. The rest is a composition in the making.

As a physician focused on integrative medicine within the traditional healthcare setting, I've had the opportunity to offer music as a therapeutic intervention to our patients suffering from some of the most challenging illnesses imaginable. Not surprisingly, music at the Mind-Body Wellness Center has evolved into one of the most appreciated and innovative interventions of our disease-based programs for individuals with cancer, heart disease, chronic lung disease and diabetes—the principle causes of healthcare expenditure, disability and mortality in our nation.

And we're not just dancing to a popular tune. Our programs, based upon rigid scientific criteria, are tracked over time. Not only have we statistically documented improvements in quality of life, our data also stands as a testimony to the fact that coordinated whole person medical interventions result in physical, emotional and social benefits that directly reduce healthcare

expenditures— savings that in this physician’s opinion would not be possible without music as a key healing component. Yet that’s not the finale.

Through basic science research soon to be published, we’ve recently taken the first step toward scientifically documenting group drumming’s benefits on the cellular level. Our project, funded by Remo Drums, Inc. and designed by our research team which includes David Felten, MD, PhD and Lee Berk DrPH of the Loma Linda University School of Medicine, Department of Neuroimmunology demonstrates statistically significant boosts in cell-mediated immune function associated with group drumming facilitated by a music therapist.

Colleagues often ask why we use drumming in our patient sessions. I typically offer a simple response— “Drums are easier to play than the violin.” All kidding aside, I’ve actually spent quite a bit of time thinking about our rationale. The following is the way I plan to explain it at the International Music Products Association trade show in Los Angeles.

Deep within the essence of who we are there’s a sound, a vibration, an emanation that expresses life from every cell. It resonates in harmony with all living creatures— an inner voice ready to emerge as a vital heartbeat that inscribes a personal signature.

The rhythm of life is a symphony— the expression of our soul revealed by the conductor within. Our unique voice resounds through the way we choose to live. When we connect with each other and extend ourselves to one another, we share our gift.

When our hands connect with a drum that vibrates with our energy, vitality, emotion, exhilaration, hope sensitivity, giving, sharing and unity, we become whole again.

For music gets through where words do not pass, when barriers separate us and when the odds are against us. It uplifts us when hopelessness darkens each day, when communications break down, when we yearn for common ground and when we need each other— the most.

Group drumming opens doors, enhances self-esteem, ensures a healthy workout, stimulates our

minds, boosts our creative potential, makes us laugh and connects us on many levels. It also builds bridges, heightens awareness and strengthens bonds.

My participation shows the world who I am, affirms that I can make a difference, and adds my unique sound to the celebration of life.

Group drumming tunes our biology, orchestrates our immunity, and enables healing to begin.

It's simply a matter of letting go, joining in and having fun—*Mind Over Matter!*