

## Orchestrating Healthcare in the Future: *the sounds of healing*

by Barry Bittman, MD

From a traditional medical perspective, while most healthcare providers enjoy music, few have ever considered it a healing strategy. Frankly, neither do insurers.

In the general scope of conventional western medicine, music therapy pales by comparison to surgery, antibiotics, chemotherapy or radiation procedures. These are the established mainstream weapons in the arsenal against disorders that include heart disease, cancer, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—the leading causes of death in our nation. Yet, when we consider that the vast majority of healthcare expenditures are not spent on curing disease, but rather on providing ongoing care for individuals with chronic illnesses, it just might pay to rethink our perspective. In fact, it may be crucial to maintaining the economic viability of our healthcare system well into the next millennium.

From a practical perspective, where does this leave us?

Essentially, successfully shaping healthcare for future generations depends on incorporating effective therapeutic strategies in a cost-effective manner. The first step is prioritizing the issues that must be addressed. That's the easy part.

Many surveys have presented data to support the fact that most visits to healthcare providers are based on issues associated with stress. And while it is exceedingly difficult to prove that stress is a significant causal factor in disease, few physicians would question its role in perpetuating the ongoing nature of illness. Therefore stress-reducing strategies are likely to garner more mainstream support as important therapeutic interventions in years to come. The problem, of course, is how to get people relaxed and focused in a healing direction.

From a clinical perspective, it is clear that no particular antibiotic, medical procedure, or relaxation strategy works for everyone. It's not surprising that individual needs, perspectives, prior experiences and upbringing are important components that determine therapeutic efficacy. That's where music's extraordinary potential as a healing strategy emerges. While numerous relaxation or mind-body strategies exist, none from a patient perspective receive the widespread acceptance of music. And it extends far beyond just setting the mood in a busy waiting room.

In our Center, music is an integral component of disease-based programs focused on individuals with cancer, heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes. It is an effective means for connecting on a deeper, more relaxed level. In critical situations, music often enters where words do not pass. It also promotes communication and facilitates a sense of camaraderie that serves to build meaningful

bonds among our patients, thereby aiding in the reestablishment of their health and well-being.

Yet the overtly positive responses and emotional expressions we've witnessed do not tell the whole story. From a scientific perspective, further proof was needed. We therefore, proceeded to study the effects of a combination of music, visual imagery and positive affirmations on patients experiencing pain or awaiting chemotherapy. Our suspicions were confirmed as measured biological consequences of anxiety were reversed in a statistically significant manner. We also recently performed an extensive study that explored the effects of music on specialized immune system components including Natural Killer cells that seek out and destroy cancer cells and viruses. Our findings strongly support group drumming as an effective means for producing biological changes conducive to healing. We are now in the process of testing a guided imagery strategy comprised of soothing words with a background of relaxing music for patients undergoing surgical procedures. Recently published studies have demonstrated diminished blood loss and length of hospital stay in individuals using this approach.

Despite these positive findings, successful integration of music in the healthcare of the future remains an ongoing challenge. It requires the collaborative efforts of healthcare providers, hospitals, researchers and insurers to work with the patient to enlist meaningful strategies that have the potential to prevent illness and facilitate healing.

Ultimately, music's potential as a whole person strategy beacons attention for integration within conventional medicine. And it's not likely to meet a significant degree of resistance—at least not from patients. A marketing study by *Roper Starch Worldwide* recently disclosed that listening to music is what most people on our planet do to ease stress. Sounds like a great reason for ongoing medical research—Mind Over Matter!