



The Sensing World

Curated by Emily Collins (Museum Consultant,
WCHN History & Heritage Collection)



Women's &
Children's Hospital
Foundation

Arts in Health



Health

Women's and Children's
Health Network



Women's
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Hospital

Don't you wonder sometimes ... about sound and vision?
(David Bowie, 'Sound and Vision', 1977)

The body is a sensing world. The hospital, too, is a sensing world; a busy microcosm of beings sensing, and being sensed in return. This exhibition tunes into both the public sensing world of the public hospital, and the private sensing world of the body. It surveys the domain of the bodily senses through historical photographs of hospital scenarios and lyrics from dated pop songs.

The Sensing World broaches all the usual sense suspects: touch, taste, smell and – in that homage to the late artist David Bowie – sound and vision. It also attends to senses less acknowledged, such as the 'sixth sense' of proprioception. Essential for balance and coordinating our motion, this is the sense of our body's position and movement. It is also a team effort; involving stretch receptors (proprioceptors) in muscles, tendons and joints, vision, and a little labyrinth (vestibular system) in the inner ear that detects orientation and rotary motion.

The exhibition's music references are many. They include Hall and Oates' song 'Out of Touch' (on dulling the senses with general anaesthetic); and Cyndi Lauper's 'True Colours' (on colour vision and the patient gaze). Their inclusion injects a sense of fun, and alludes to intriguing musical connections this curator uncovered with regard to medical listening, sense testing apparatus, and even the sensing apparatus of the body. Consider, again, the ear. It also contains the tiny tympanic membrane, stretched taut to vibrate in response to soundwaves. No wonder we call it the ear drum!

Still on the ear, while the tuning fork was first invented by trumpeter John Shore in 1711 to tune musical instruments in the English Royal Court for composer George Frideric Handel, it was later adopted by neurologists to diagnose hearing disorders.



Image: Medical listening, ACH, early 1960s



Image: Neurologist Dr JI Manson testing a knee-jerk reflex, ACH, 1976

Due to the superior accuracy of the audiometer, however, the tuning fork is rarely seen in medical practice today. A more enduring object of medical percussion is the mallet hammer, routinely used to test a patient's nerve sensing (ie. the knee-jerk reflex).

Medical percussion does not stop with assessing 'The Reflex' (with thanks to pop group Duran Duran). Doctors also percuss human bodies as one of the core 'touch' techniques in a standard clinical examination. Percussion over a solid organ such as a liver produces a dull note, while a patient's bowel makes a resonant sound, being quite hollow. Although a subtle sound is elicited, doctors rely more on feeling the vibration that produces the sound, especially in noisy wards. Pulse-taking also works on this principle. Medical anthropologist Anna Harris calls this 'listening-touch', while heavy metal rockers Quiet Riot say: 'Come on Feel the Noise'!

Another key examination technique is auscultation: using a stethoscope to listen to a patient's lungs. Anna Harris and Eleanor Flynn report that medical students with prior training in music find it easier to detect and describe differences in the timbre and rhythm of lung sounds. Rene Laennec, who invented the stethoscope in 1816, drew on his own musical skills in creating the first code system of lung sounds, often comparing them to musical instruments. Unhealthy lungs can produce some rather musical noises – from whistling to polyphonic wheezing.

In curating this exhibition using the WCHN History and Heritage Collection, my first focus was on the sensing patient. But what emerged from the artefacts was the strong sensing world of the patient examiner. The exhibition thus searches for places where the senses of the medical practitioner, and those of the patient, meet. These meetings occur not only through eyes, hands and other sense organs, but through the mediating devices of ordinary objects like the comb, and testing apparatus such as the stethoscope.

Medicine is a bodily endeavour involving the sophisticated application of sensory medical knowledge. *The Sensing World* demonstrates the inseparability of the senses, and the value of a multisensory practice of medicine for examining and treating the multisensory body.

Emily Collins



Image: Gym program for coordination and balance – proprioception, ACH, 1981

Bibliography

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- K Bijsterveld (2019), *Sonic skills: listening for knowledge in science, medicine and engineering (1920s–present)*, Palgrave Macmillan.

This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kurna People. We pay our respects to the Kurna Elders past and present, and to the Elders of the lands this brochure reaches.

The Curator wishes to thank: Jill Newman and Lauren Simeoni (WCH Foundation); Alex Del Gaudio and Marg Lea (WCHN History and Heritage Group); Natalie Dempster (WCHN Library) and Tim Boord (WCHN Corporate Communications).

History and Heritage Collection

The Women's and Children's Health Network has a collection of historical artefacts which is managed by the WCHN History and Heritage Group. This was originally formed as the ICONS Group in 1995 by retired Adelaide Children's Hospital Staff. The Group aims to preserve, collect, collate, catalogue, store, display and interpret items of historical significance to the Women's and Children's Hospital and its predecessors the Adelaide Children's Hospital, the Queen Victoria Hospital and associated institutions.

Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation Arts in Health program

The WCH Foundation Arts in Health program coordinates five galleries in the Hospital, providing a space away from the stresses of treatment to distract, entertain and inspire, improving the visual environment. The Arts in Health programs integrate art into the life of the Hospital to improve people's health and wellbeing. We try to make the environment more 'child-friendly', making it look better and helping to make the time spent in hospital 'feel better'. The Yellow Heart Gallery provides a platform to share the WCHN History and Heritage Collection with the Hospital community and explore the significant people and events that shaped the Hospital today.

The Sensing World is on display in the Pink Heart Gallery (Level 1, Zone F) at the Women's and Children's Hospital from September 2021 until February 2022.

Cover Image: *Medical percussion – nerve sensing, ACH, 1976*



For more information contact:

Jill Newman, Manager Arts in Health
jill.newman@wchfoundation.org.au
T 08 8464 7900 | M 0408215372
artsinhealth@wchfoundation.org.au
55 King William Road | North Adelaide | SA 5006
www.wchfoundation.org.au