Art, health and the evidence debates: practical insights from field research

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This paper concerns the proliferation of art and cultural programs designed to improve individual and community health and wellbeing at the local level, and the challenge to provide evidence for their effectiveness. Arts and health initiatives in rural and remote communities around Australia involve a wide range of ages, cultures and art forms, addressing the full spectrum of health determinants in health promotion, clinical and community settings. The sheer scope and diversity of practice is testimony to their perceived benefits by health professionals, artists and communities alike. With the increasing up-take of the arts in health fields internationally, however, comes the expectation of evidence-based practice and rigorous evaluation of their effects. While each context presents particular research challenges, debates about evidence in relation to broad social and economic determinants—what counts, which methods are appropriate—are perhaps most controversial. It is no coincidence that this is also the part of the field where the interdisciplinary nature of practice is most apparent.

The practical implications of these debates will be explored, drawing on the experience of evaluating several major community-based initiatives in South Australia, with particular reference to the Regional Centre of Culture program in 2010 and 2012. An initiative of the SA Government, this program is distinguished by the arts and culture playing a leading role in extensive, region-wide, intersectoral partnerships to ‘(re)vitalise’ communities. By offering diverse opportunities to engage creatively, such approaches aim to enhance quality of life and promote individual health and wellbeing, while building the conditions for creative and more resourceful communities in the longer term. Evaluation findings consistently suggest there are compelling reasons for the growing interest expressed by rural and remote health services in collaborative arts-based approaches. The capacity for arts practice to draw out and extend multiple personal and social strengths within individuals and communities makes them particularly well suited to addressing complex social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing. These same qualities also present a range of challenges in demonstrating the observed effects, however. The paper will discuss these issues taking into account the multiple perspectives on health, art, and evidence that inform such ‘upstream’ health interventions. Experience shows that just as complex problems call for genuinely multidisciplinary interventions, their evaluation requires that these be matched by multidimensional research methods.