

Critical Reflections and Future Perspectives on Research in Arts and Health: Network Meeting and Conference 3-4 April 2025 Salzburg, Austria

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Introduction

The inaugural meeting of the International Network for the Critical Appraisal for Arts and Health Research (INCAAHR) took place in person and online on 3 April 2025, followed by a one-day conference in person and online on 4 April 2025. The background for these meetings lies in a series of papers published between 2021-24 by us and a growing number of colleagues of INCAAHR internationally, identifying concerns with the quality and accuracy of research and evidence reviews in the field of arts and health (Clift et al., 2021, 2022, 2024; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022, 2023; Kaasgaard et al., 2024). The goal of these two events was to reflect on recent developments in the field. We aimed to raise the profile of arts and health, and arts in medicine across Austria, while also learning from good practice internationally and from recent developments in the United States and the UK, supported by the World Health Organization. It appeared timely to us to engage in a balanced and constructive discussion concerning the current state of research in arts for health.

The conference was organised by the Interuniversity Organisation Science & Arts (University of Salzburg and Mozarteum University Salzburg), and we were aided in the planning and running of the two events by staff at Salzburg Global/Health Programs, and Salzburg Institute for Arts in Medicine. We had the pleasure of meeting at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, home of the von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music*.

Inaugural Meeting of the International Network

Our first day provided an opportunity for many members of the recently established network to meet for the first time (Figure 1), with additional members joining us online. Details of the network's mission, aims and membership can be found on the website of the Salzburg Institute for Arts in Medicine.

Our aims are:

- to promote excellence through robust and transparent appraisal of arts and health research.
- to develop guidelines for conducting and reporting arts and health research and evidence reviews.
- to critically assess the role of research in shaping arts and health policies and evidence-based practices.

We currently have over forty members working in the field of arts and health throughout the world, with a wide range of disciplinary and methodological expertise (full list at the end of this report).

After welcome speeches, we were led in exercises by Faye Hobson, Director of the Culture programme at Salzburg Global, to begin to meet and develop shared understandings for the conduct of the day. Following this, Stephen Clift chaired a panel of Network members sharing recent developments in their research in arts and health that are advancing new forms of health, care and wellbeing. Matt McCrary, Hannover Medical School, Germany, talked about theory construction in arts and health and the role of autonomic tone in music engagement and physical exercise. He is currently involved in the development of mobile technology to measure physiological functions including heart rate, and the presence of music in the environment (McCrary & Altenmüller, 2021; McCrary and Altenmüller, 2021). Mette Kaasgaard, University of Southern Denmark, presented her recent work in designing and conducting trials to evaluate the effects of singing for people with respiratory conditions. Carefully designed studies are required, as there are many misconceptions about the effects of singing on the lungs (Kaasgaard et al., 2022). Christina Davies, University of Western Australia, outlined her recent work in evaluating a public arts and health campaign across the whole of Western Australia. The campaign is based on previous research suggesting that two hours of creative activity a week improves mental wellbeing. The key message of the campaign is: 'You don't have to be good at art, for the arts to be good for you' (Davies et al., 2025). Finally, we heard about the outcomes of a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of arts on prescription evaluations from Anita Jensen, Lund University, Sweden, Nicola Holt, University of the West of England, and Hilary Bungay, Anglia Ruskin University, UK. The review included 25 studies from across the world and the quantitative analysis demonstrated improvements in wellbeing. Qualitative results suggested that arts activities improved social connections and self-confidence. The team identified limitations in previous studies, however, and gave guidelines for further research (Bungay et al., 2024; Jensen et al., 2024).

The remainder of the morning was taken up with discussions facilitated by Fay Hobson of Salzburg Global exploring challenges facing the field of arts and health, and the development of INCAAHR. Issues examined included: challenges in evidence and



Figure 1. Members of the International Network on the steps of the Schloss Leopoldskron
 Back: Eva Schurig, Arne Bathke, Andrew Danso, Christina Davies, Matthew Pelowski, Matt McCrary, George Musgrave.
 Middle: Isabel Fernholz, Eleonor Pesl, Valerie Oberleithner, Anita Jensen, Leonhard Thun-Hochstein.
 Front: Chris Yi-Yi Wang, Angela Pickard, Radwa Khalil, Mette Kaasgaard, Stephen Clift, Hilary Bungay, and Katarzyna Grebosz-Haring.

evidence appraisal; challenges in the implementation of research findings; challenges associated with the technical expertise required in arts and health research; and finally, challenges of evaluating the impact of arts and health initiatives.

The afternoon sessions facilitated by Kateryna Anselmi from Salzburg Global turned to the development of INCAAHR and its future directions over the next three years. Ideas included the development of a steering group for the network to set a strategic plan for future activities in research, practice and policy, the need for promotion of our work through an online seminar programme, and a raised profile through social media. Further ideas included broadening the network to include creative artists involved in arts for health initiatives, and encouraging involvement from Ph.D. students and early career researchers in the field. There was general agreement that the goals of the network are to work constructively to promote the highest quality of research and evidence reviews in the field. So far, our publications have highlighted limitations with published evidence, but we should also celebrate excellent work that can provide a secure foundation for policy development and practice.

Conference: Critical Reflections and Future Perspectives on Research in Arts and Health

Day two was given over to an international conference exploring current developments in arts and health research and challenges facing the field. Over 75 delegates joined us at Schloss Leopoldskron, and a further 60 delegates joined online. Welcome speeches were given by Ben Galhn, Deputy CEO at Salzburg Global, Leonhard Thun-Hohenstein and Katarzyna Grebosz-Haring Founding Co-Directors Salzburg Institute for Arts in Medicine. The first session then addressed the question: ‘What is the current state of scientific evidence in the field of arts and health and its role in formulating policy and guiding action?’ Dame Janet Ritterman, former Director of the Royal College of Music, London chaired the session, and

the first presentation was from Nils Fietje, Founding Co-Director, Jameel Arts and Health Lab, and Technical Officer for the BCI Unit, WHO Regional Office in Copenhagen. Nils gave an update on the work of the WHO on arts and health, including a major collaboration with The Lancet in publishing a special Global Issue on Arts and Health expected by the end of 2025 (Sajnani & Fietje, 2023). Next, Kornelia Kiss of Culture Action Europe described initiatives funded by the European Commission, including conclusions reached in the CultureForHealth report (Zbranca et al., 2022).

Finally in this first session, Stephen Clift gave an overview of the publications from the Network and illustrated further the need for critical appraisal in the field focusing on references to singing for health in the 2019 WHO scoping review, and the lack of a critical perspective in recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses of arts and health research (Daykin et al., 2018; Clift et al., 2024; Quinn et al., 2025).

During the afternoon session, the focus was on the question: ‘What is the value of lived experience, narrative testimony, and case studies in the field of arts and health?’ Sebastian Debus, University Hospital Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany, chaired the session which opened with a keynote presentation given by Jill Sonke, Centre for Arts in Medicine, University of Florida. Sonke outlined findings from a national arts and health initiative in the United States – One Nation/One Project, ‘designed to activate the power of the arts to repair the social fabric of our nation and heal our communities’ (Carroll et al., 2025; Sonke et al., 2025). Next, Hannah Waterson, Research and Policy Manager, National Centre for Creative Health, presented a major survey of creative health initiatives across the UK – the *Creative Health Review* (NCCCH/APPG, 2023). Following Hannah, Eva Schurig, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, offered critical reflections on the role of case studies in evidencing the value of creative activity for health and wellbeing. The session ended with an overview of challenges in quantitative research on arts and health from Arne Bathke, University of Salzburg, emphasising the central role of statistics in assessing the limits of confidence in empirical findings.

The last session of the conference was a panel discussion chaired by Matt McCrary, Hanover Medical School, Germany which tackled the following key questions facing the field: ‘What can be learnt from international best practices, and can we arrive at a consensus in the best interests of promoting the highest quality research, reviews and practice in the field of arts and health?’ A lively discussion took place with panel members – Arne Bathke, Christian Davies, Nils Fietje, Anita Jensen, Janet Ritterman, and Leonhard Thun-Hohenstein.

The conference closed with an engaging performance and talk from mezzo soprano Vivien Conacher, London/Salzburg, drawing on her experience of engaging with people with dementia through music.

Further Developments

Following the Salzburg events, a steering group for INCAAHR was established and has met to develop an organisational structure and workplan for 2025-2028. An online seminar programme will start on 23 October 2025 from Salzburg with Martin Skov and Marcus Nadal speaking about their recent *Physics of Life Review* paper and commentaries on it (Skov & Nadal, 2025). Further webinars will be organised from the University of West of England (Nicola Holt), the University of Vienna (Mathew Pelowski) and Canterbury Christ Church University (Angela Pickard). INCAAHR has also established a presence on LinkedIn, with regular postings. The meetings have also resulted in positive

opportunities for collaboration. Network member Christina Davies was invited to speak at the September 2025 Culture and Health Forum meeting in Finland, and Daisy Fan-court, Director of the Social and Biobehavioural Research Group, University College London, has invited INCAAHR to collaborate on further research. Finally, the network plans to run annual events in Salzburg with a second meeting in April 2026.

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