





The Art of Healing Enhancing Patient Life Participation through the Performance Arts

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Perspectives

As nephrologists, our primary mission is to preserve kidney function and improve the quality of life for patients with CKD, those on dialysis, and kidney transplant recipients. CKD and dialysis impose significant lifestyle restrictions; patients often experience the inconvenience of therapy, increased family burden, pessimism about the future, low mood, and social isolation.^{1,2} Yet, medical management alone cannot always address the emotional and psychosocial challenges these patients face.¹

Recent studies show that arts engagement—from clinical interventions to community programs—can reduce physical symptoms and improve mental health in patients, supporting holistic approaches to care.^{3,4} Over the past two decades, we have explored the role of performance arts as a complementary approach in CKD care—patients may benefit from the arts both as audience members and as active participants. Here, we describe two initiatives: a series of musicals commissioned for kidney patients and the Kids' Dream Choir, a patient-led choir.

Musicals Commissioned for Kidney Patients

Actors' Family, a Hong Kong-based musical company, has produced original Cantonese musicals since the 1990s. P.K.-T. Li, chairman since 2012, has had a longstanding interest in musicals and believes in their therapeutic potential.

In 2004, as Chairman of the Hong Kong Society of Nephrology (HKSAN), P.K.-T. Li commissioned the musical *The Good Person of Szechwan*, adapted from Bertolt Brecht with original music and Cantonese lyrics from local artists. The show was organized for kidney patients—including those on peritoneal dialysis, hemodialysis, and transplant recipients—and was held in a theater with a capacity of over 1000 spectators. Each

patient, along with one accompanying person, was able to attend the musical free of charge. The logistics, including hemodialysis schedules and peritoneal dialysis exchanges, were managed by dedicated doctors and nurses.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The efforts of the team and kidney centers were recognized through the excellent feedback received from patients and their families. Many remarked that they would not have engaged in such meaningful social activities if not organized by HKSAN. Some quotes from patients and caregivers: “It was a wonderful experience and a very enjoyable day out for me and my wife”; “Never think that Hong Kong can produce such a high quality original Cantonese musical”; and “I was in tears seeing the struggle of the heroine to survive.” *The Good Person of Szechwan* described a single mother, deceived by her husband, trying to struggle to live in the morality of “goods” amid her fellow peers in Szechwan. It addressed ethical and philosophical themes such as compassion, moral ambiguity, and the struggle to do good in adversity, which resonated with patients confronting chronic illness.

Since 2004, HKSAN has commissioned seven musicals (six by Actors' Family) for patients with kidney diseases:

- *The Good Person of Szechwan* (2004, 2019) ([Figure 1A](#)).
- *The Love Story of Sam and Sally* (2008).
- *The Passage Beyond* (2011).
- *1941 Girl* (2014).
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2016).
- *The Impossible Trial* (2022, performed by the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and jointly commissioned with [International Association of Chinese Nephrologists](#)).

Each musical was attended by approximately 1000 patients and care partners. Patients valued the opportunity to participate in social and cultural activities, which

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A



B



Figure 1. Performance arts initiatives for patients. (A) Musical of “The Good Person of Szechwan” in December 2019 in Theater filled with patients and care partners. (B) The Kids’ Dream Choir performing in the [fifth International Congress of Chinese Nephrologists in December 2024](#).

helped them reconnect with daily life. The selected musicals featured themes relevant to patients’ experiences, such as family, friendship, and resilience. For example, *The Passage Beyond* explored life and death—despite initial concerns, the production was well received and facilitated reflection on these important topics.

These events fostered a sense of inclusion and empowerment, encouraging patients to move beyond medical routines and engage with the broader community.

The Kids’ Dream Choir

The Kids’ Dream Choir was founded in the spring of 2016 by a dedicated group of music-loving patients and staff at the Paediatric Nephrology Centre in Hong Kong.⁵ A.L.-T. Ma is the team lead. The choir started humbly as a small ensemble of 15 participants, with its first performance serving as a fundraising event for the Children’s Kidney Fund—a nongovernmental organization supporting children with severe kidney diseases in Hong Kong.

Senior kidney nurses led the choir's coordination and administration, playing a crucial role in its development. The debut performance in March 2016 was met with great enthusiasm, as the children's angelic voices resonated with the audience, inspiring further engagement. After this success, the choir received invitations to perform at prestigious international conferences, including The Transplantation Society Congress in 2016, the Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation in 2023, and **International Congress of Chinese Nephrologists in 2024** (Figure 1B). We were also invited by governmental bodies and professional organizations to promote kidney health and organ donation.

Recognizing the positive effect of music, the choir expanded to include 30 members, consisting of current patients, their families and friends, volunteers, and former patients who graduated from our unit and returned to support the team. This growth was made possible through the commitment of dedicated volunteers, including family and friends of the patients.

During practice sessions, children explore a diverse repertoire of music and learn fundamental elements such as harmony, lyrics, and rhythm through engaging activities. Clinicians and musicians collaborate to create original music for the choir, while participants are encouraged to take leadership roles. From designing the musical program to choreographing dance moves, children are empowered to express themselves fully.

Every choir practice invites parental involvement, fostering a collaborative atmosphere. We also engage various organizations and schools, enabling volunteers to connect with patients and their families, creating valuable support networks. Parents who participate are able to engage with one another, providing peer support, while healthcare professionals strengthen their relationships with patients through these activities. This community-building aspect is vital in establishing a supportive network for both children and their families.

Since its inception, the Kids' Dream Choir has performed in over 50 open events aimed at promoting organ donation and kidney health. All of the performances were consistently well received with significant media attention, which in turns played a crucial role in raising the awareness about the needs of children with kidney diseases. The recent survey among 25 regular choir participants—44% of patients with CKD, 44% parents, and 12% volunteers—showed that 72% felt the program enhanced their well-being and self-image, while 84% felt empowered in managing their disease.⁶ These results highlight the positive effect of music-based activities on children with CKD.

Conclusions

Participation in the performance arts—as audience members or performers—positively affects the well-being, social engagement, and empowerment of patients with CKD and their families. These initiatives support patients in reconnecting with society, foster inclusion, and provide opportunities for meaningful experiences beyond the clinical environment.

Such programs are adaptable and could benefit kidney patients internationally. We encourage nephrology teams worldwide to consider integrating arts-based approaches

as part of comprehensive kidney care. This work aligns with the emerging field of arts-based action research in medicine, which values creative and participatory methods to improve patient outcomes. These methods are becoming increasingly popular as innovative, accessible, and exciting approaches for inquiry into the social world. In addition, they are being widely recognized for their ability to engage communities in action research processes that transcend age, education, language, and cultural barriers.⁷ By sharing these experiences, we aim to inform and inspire further efforts toward holistic, person-centered care for people living with chronic illness.

Additional Material

A link to the video of the performance of the Kids' Dream Choir: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1ZVP6n28ji/?mibextid=wwXlfr>.

Disclosures

Disclosure forms, as provided by each author, are available with the online version of the article at <http://links.lww.com/CJN/C326>.

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