

Stressed? Sick? Maybe museum visits could help

Swiss town is allowing doctors to prescribe exposure to art as part of patients' treatment.

BY JAMEY KEATEN

NEUCHATEL, Switzerland — The world's woes got you down? Feeling burnout at work? Need a little something extra to fight illness or prep for surgery? The Swiss town of Neuchatel is offering its residents a novel medical option: Expose yourself to art and get a doctor's note to do it for free.

Under a new two-year pilot project, local and regional authorities are covering the costs of "museum prescriptions" issued by doctors who believe their patients could benefit from visits to any of the town's four museums as part of their treatment.

The project is based on a [2019 World Health Organization report](#) that found the arts can boost mental health, reduce the impact of trauma and lower the risk of cognitive decline, frailty and "premature mortality," among other upsides.

Art can help relax the mind — as a sort of preventive medicine — and visits to museums require getting up and out of the house with physical activity such as walking and standing for long periods.

Neuchatel council member Julie Courcier Delafontaine said the COVID-19 crisis also played a role in the program's genesis. "With the closure of cultural sites [during lockdowns], people realized just how much we need them to feel better."

She said so far some 500 prescriptions have been distributed to doctors around town and the program costs "very little." Ten thousand Swiss francs (about \$11,300) have been budgeted for it.

If successful, local officials could expand the program to other artistic activities such as theater or dance, Courcier Delafontaine said. The Swiss national healthcare system doesn't cover "culture as a means of therapy," but she hopes it might one day, if the results are positive enough.

Marianne de Reynier Nevsky, the cultural mediation manager in the town of 46,000 who helped devise the program, said it built on a similar idea rolled out at the Fine Arts

Museum in Montreal in 2019.

She said many types of patients could benefit.

“It could be a person with depression, a person who has trouble walking, a person with a chronic illness,” she said near a display of a feather headdress from Papua New Guinea at the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchatel, a converted former villa that overlooks Lake Neuchatel.

Part of the idea is to get recalcitrant patients out of the house and walking more.

Dr. Marc-Olivier Sauvain, head of surgery at the Neuchatel Hospital Network, said he had already prescribed museum visits to two patients to help them get in better shape before a planned operation.

He said a wider rollout is planned once a control group is set up. For his practice, the focus will be on patients who admit that they’ve lost the habit of going out. He wants them to get moving.

“It’s wishful thinking to think that telling them to go walk or go for a stroll to improve their fitness level before surgery” will work, Sauvain said on a video call Saturday, wearing blue scrubs. “I think that these patients will fully benefit from museum prescriptions. We’ll give them a chance to get physical and intellectual exercise.”

“And as a doctor, it’s really nice to prescribe museum visits rather than medicines or tests that patients don’t enjoy,” he added. “To tell them ‘It’s a medical order that instructs you to go visit one of our nice city museums.’ ”

Some museum-goers see the upsides too.

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Carla Fragniere Filliger, a poet and retired teacher, during a visit to the ethnography museum. “There should be prescriptions for all the museums in the world!”

Keaten writes for the Associated Press.