



## Art for healthy aging

*Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer*

**For a long time it** was assumed that the key stages of life were infancy, childhood and adolescence. After that, you were a grownup! This meant, rather literally, that you were finished growing. Fortunately, the idea that people continue to develop gained currency, recognizing that growing was more than physical, it was also neurological and intellectual.

Canada's population is not only aging, it is also changing character. By 2050 a quarter of Canadians will be aged 65 or older; today that figure is about 15 percent. Healthy aging is thus a particularly important goal — it will benefit more and more people, and on a wider level, help control the costs and challenges of an aging population.

At any age, art in all its forms, can provide benefits; this is particularly true for the elderly. Neurological research clearly shows that making art can improve cognitive functions by producing both new neural pathways and thicker, stronger dendrites (involved in passing on signals in the brain). In this way, art helps the brain by using more efficient networks. It even helps the brain to re-map how some connections are made as cells in one area become incapacitated. The process is called elasticity as some cells replace the function of others. In short, making art causes the brain to continue to reshape, adapt and restructure.

In a groundbreaking new book published in 2000, Dr Gene Cohen expounded on the idea of what was possible with aging, moving research towards a goal beyond “what is aging?” His research recognized that older

adults had a capacity for creativity that was not being recognized due to negative attitudes towards the elderly.

His study, the first of its kind, found a link between creativity and healthier aging. Compared to those in the study's control groups, people who participated in art programs enjoyed better health, both physical and mental.

Recognizing the link between the arts and healthy aging, Vancouver Coastal Health has been partnering with Vancouver Parks and Recreation, community groups and local artists to provide “community-engaged” arts programs to vulnerable and marginalized older adults. The three-year pilot project commenced in 2006 and was extended a further three years to 2012.

The programs run by the VCH and its Vancouver partners are finding great success. Under the name of AHS Programs (Arts, Health and Seniors: Healthy Aging through the Arts), six programs are now operating. Participants have collaborated on multiple projects from writing and digital photography to puppet theatre, storytelling and dance and much more.

Programs are built around a chosen artist and an associate artist, along with a seniors' or community worker. Content and delivery are

the responsibility of the artist(s) while administrative and other tasks fall to the community worker.

AHS works. Participants are engaged in challenging, interesting ways that has led to increasing confidence and better sense of identity. The discipline and focus of participating also encourages seniors to take part in other activities that promote health.

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