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["The case for regulating art therapy in Singapore"](#),

The case for regulating art therapy in Singapore



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“At present, since there is neither a requirement for registration nor a nationally accepted standard of practice, there is nothing stopping anyone from calling themselves an art therapist,” says the author.

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Living through the turmoil of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, people of all ages and backgrounds from around the world are discovering the pleasure of art, while others are rekindling and returning to old hobbies and interests.

As a credentialed and experienced mental health practitioner and educator for 23 years, I have observed first-hand how engaging in the arts has a profound impact on mental health, balance and quality of life.

There is an important difference, however, between the discipline of art therapy and the therapeutic benefits of art.

I believe it is timely to examine the distinction, as well as to make a case for the regulation of creative arts and activity therapies in Singapore.

THE DISCIPLINE OF ART THERAPY

Art therapy is a distinct mental health discipline that draws on the traditions, theory and practices of art and psychology.

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It involves a series of intentional interaction with art, art-making, reflection and insight between a client, their art-making processes, and a qualified, trained art therapist.

In Singapore, similar to the introduction and development of the education of psychiatrists and psychologists in the early 2000s, postgraduate art therapy training was introduced at Lasalle College of the Arts in 2005.

Psychotherapy and psychotherapy training since those pivotal early years have made significant inroads across the local mental health landscape.

Singapore's [Allied Health Professions Act](#) currently covers the registration of qualified allied health professionals such as physiotherapists, and the setting of standards for training, conduct, ethics and practice of these professionals.

Currently, the Act does not include art therapists.

Regulation is necessary to ensure that vulnerable and at-risk groups of people receive safe and professional services that are aligned to established industry best practices, standards, ethics and law.

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At present, since there is neither a requirement for registration nor a nationally accepted standard of practice, there is nothing stopping anyone from calling themselves an art therapist.

The rigour and substance of the training required to become an art therapist is significant. In addition to lectures, workshops, artmaking and research, Lasalle's two-year [MA Art Therapy](#) training involves a total of 816 hours of evidenced supervised clinical placement.

Risk and harm in psychotherapies do exist, and must be proactively addressed as part of protecting clients through legislated regulation and registration.

Trained art therapists value the need to safeguard the emotional, psychological and physical safety of those receiving services. Untrained "practitioners", however well-meaning, pose a risk to the public and to themselves.

SINGAPORE: A REGIONAL LEADER IN ART THERAPY

Art therapy as a discipline is relatively new in Southeast Asia, but Singapore in particular has embraced art therapy and is leading in its development and in the training of qualified art therapists.

The postgraduate art therapy training at Lasalle is the only one of its kind in Singapore and in Southeast Asia, and since 2007, 198 qualified art therapists have graduated from the programme.

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From a training perspective, this amounts to well over 177,000 hours of documented clinical art therapy services provided across Singapore by the postgraduate trainees, not to mention thousands of hours of community service.

The profession of art therapy seamlessly aligns to Singapore's National Mental Health Blueprint as mental health, wellness and well-being are core tenets of the practice.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, demand for and interest in art therapy has risen.

The pandemic has challenged traditional conventions of where and how therapy can be provided, has expanded notions of what might be used as therapeutic implements of creativity, and has offered novel opportunities to further evolve the training and practice.

One example is the Collection Cares programme, organised by the National Heritage Board in partnership with Red Balloon Therapy.

These art therapy sessions for seniors have been so successful in alleviating feelings of isolation and improving their well-being that after the pilot run in December 2020, the programme returned for a second edition in September 2021.

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Other outstanding projects include FoundSpace's Project Memory, #art4SGMW, and Montfort Care's Tapestries of Grief: Witnessing Through Art Therapy project and exhibition.

The growing interest in art therapy in Singapore makes formal regulation all the more pressing. Regulation will provide clarity, education, guidance and safety to members of the public while also advancing the profession.

Art outlets which offer general stress relief, such as art jams, adult colouring books or even some community arts activities, are sometimes mistakenly referred to as art therapy or a form of art therapy.

In the absence of a nationally recognised framework for the clinical and therapeutic practice of art therapy, public perception of the profession as a distinct mental health discipline is slow to shift.

The lack of regulation and definition of the profession at a legislative level also poses a challenge for the hiring of art therapists.

At present, there is no official job description, established pay or progression structure or other relevant guidance for organisations that might hire an art therapist.

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Regulation is instrumental in opening up more jobs and greater opportunities for qualified art therapists locally.

Art therapy is a regulated profession in the United Kingdom, through the Health and Care Professions Council. Increasingly in the United States, state legislators are officially recognising art therapy and art therapists through title protection, registration and/or licensure.

With regulation of the profession comes accountability and strict adherence to the codes of practice.

The legal recognition of art therapy asserts the integrity of the discipline while meaningfully addressing the mental health and wellness of the nation through increased accessibility, training and research.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

I would like to close with a vision for the future of art therapy and all creative arts and activities therapies in Singapore.

Firstly, I envision that all major hospitals, rehabilitation centres, schools, hospices, non-governmental organisations and community centres in Singapore will have well-established and sustaining creative arts and activities therapies departments fully integrated within their setting to effectively address the increasing mental health concerns of this nation.

Secondly, I hope that the discipline of art therapy, and all creative arts and activities therapies, will be formally recognised within the Allied Health Professions Act and relevant government ministries.

Last but not least, I envision that the discipline of art therapy, and all creative arts and activity therapies, will be granted title protection given the intensive, rigorous and highly-structured training, best practices and ethics involved.

Singapore is very well positioned to be the first region in Asia to officially recognise art therapy, and all creative arts and activity therapies, as distinct disciplines and to regulate the profession.

We can lead the way in taking this critical step for the protection of vulnerable groups of people, the elevation of the discipline, and the betterment of mental health services, wellness and well-being for all Singaporeans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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