

Toward a Performing Arts Medicine Definition of Performing Arts

As the Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA) celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, it seems to be a good time to discuss a definition of what the field includes—and, by extension, what it doesn't include. Some may think that this might not be the best use of our time, since we have done pretty well so far without a written definition of the performing arts. However, a presentation at the 27th Annual Symposium on the Medical Problems of Musicians & Dancers on health issues of circus performers¹ and some recent articles in *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* on artistic and rhythmic gymnasts^{2,3} have helped us broaden the scope of our field. While I find this exciting and another indication that performing arts medicine is a vibrant, essential specialty within the universe of health care, it also makes me wonder what else ought to be included in the field and what shouldn't.

A quick review of the mission statements of some of the leading performing arts medicine organizations and institutions shows a variety of working definitions that focus on dancers, musicians and "other performing artists." Actors are mentioned on the PAMA website. The British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) has no written definition on their website,⁴ but five pictures at the top of their homepage show dancers, actors, a cellist, a sword swallower, and a singer or storyteller. The Dutch Performing Arts Medicine Association (NVDMG) mentions musicians and dancers on their homepage.⁵

In a simpler world, this should simply be a matter of looking up the definition of *performing arts* in some dictionaries. However, since we live in a

very complex world, dictionaries do not help us much in this situation. Some of the common elements of definitions of *performing arts* include the need to do something before an audience and to use one's own body in doing so. Viewed more broadly, the arts include visual arts and literature in addition to the performing arts, though the visual arts and literature are not based on the artist's body being part of the final product. We enter a gray area between the visual and performing arts when we consider "performance art," a relatively new phenomenon.

Trying to stake out the territory that belongs to performing arts medicine by considering it to be a subspecialty within occupational medicine does not get us very far, either. While everyone understands occupational medicine to be focused on the diseases and injuries that occur as a result of the work we do or the jobs we hold, it is not as obvious how to carve out the jobs that involve the performing arts. Furthermore, many avid performing artists ply their craft without pay, often just for the joy of performing.

One distinction that should be easy to make is the difference between the performing arts and sports. But defining sports as an athletic activity requiring physical skill in a competitive setting leaves ample opportunity for overlap with dance and music. Frank Wilson often referred to musicians as "small muscle athletes,"⁶ and many forms of dance have a clearly athletic quality to them. Conversely, some sports have an artistic component, such as figure skating and rhythmic gymnastics, and both music and dance have competitive aspects, be it explicit or implicit.

The sports that have artistic qualities cause us to think hard about what is art and what is sport. That figure skating and rhythmic gymnastics are true sports is not in question; both are featured in the Olympic games (winter and summer, respectively), both require a high level of physical skill, and both require participants to expend significant calories during both training and performances. Articles on the medical aspects of figure skating are well represented in the sports medicine literature⁷ but have not appeared in this journal. As mentioned above, *MPPA* has published articles on rhythmic gymnastics, although it too is a prominent part of certain sports medicine journals.⁸

And what about circus performers? They are not competing in the usual sense of the term, and their performances seem to be as much about accomplishing amazing feats as they are about displaying great artistry. Obviously, they are performing for an audience, and circuses have been a part of our culture for a very long time. Articles about injuries among circus performers have also appeared in the sports medicine literature,⁹ but they would also fit easily in *MPPA*.

Performing arts medicine is not unique if it is struggling a bit to "brand" what we do and where our expertise lies. My own medical specialty, internal medicine, has long labored under the burden of limited public understanding of what an internist does and what our training emphasizes. "Internists" are confused with "interns"; the roles of general internists overlap to a significant extent with those of family medicine specialists, and the various subspecialists (e.g., cardiologists, nephrologists,

endocrinologists, etc.) spend little energy telling the public that they are first internists. When people ask me what internal medicine is, I tell them it's the non-surgical care of non-pregnant adults. The American College of Physicians (ACP, the somewhat confusing name of the professional organization for internists) has branded us as "doctors for adults."¹⁰ The ACP was founded nearly 100 years ago and has over 100,000 members, so it has had far longer to define its identity and more resources to bring to bear on that issue; its own history suggests that it spent at least 11 years figuring out the boundaries of its field.¹¹

So how should we define *performing arts* for the purposes of performing arts medicine? First, I do not have the authority to define the term for the entire field. In the interest of transparency, I will go on record with my

views of how we might define it for this journal with the understanding that this will be a dynamic definition, subject to further discussion and change depending on future events:

The performing arts will be viewed broadly, happily including a range of human activities that occur in front of an audience (at least some of the time) and attempt to add to our understanding, appreciation, and/or celebration of the human experience. They may or may not involve some form of competition, but this will not be the primary reason for the activity. They will require varying amounts of energy expenditure, but the best performances will not be determined primarily by how much energy was expended.

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