

Diversity in Performing Arts Medicine

As the diverse populations of the planet interact on a more frequent and intense basis, it becomes increasingly important for every individual and organization to examine its own approach to this vital issue. The field of performing arts medicine should pay particular attention to diversity for a number of reasons, some of which will help to advance our specialty and improve the lives of performing artists, while others may help save the world.

We should start by acknowledging that the subject matter of performing arts medicine is inherently diverse. We are concerned with a wide range of the performing arts (instrumental music that spans numerous musical devices, vocal music that is made up of a variety of genres, and the various types of dance and theatrical arts as well) that are brought to life by people worldwide. This includes men and women who represent nearly the full age range of human existence. Since every human culture has developed and used the performing arts to express what it means to be a conscious being, those of us who care about the health of performing artists must be ready to apply our knowledge and skills to individuals who may have little in common besides their art.

Likewise, the field of performing arts medicine has been a “big tent” operation since its inception. We have included not only physicians but also other health care professionals, those who teach and perform, and others who are part of the performing arts community. Our meetings and publications have encompassed participation from around the world. This enlightened (and ultimately patient-centered) approach is not very common in the universe of health-related associations,

but it has clearly contributed to the scope and quality of the work we have done.

Looking back over the last 20-plus years, those of us who have been active in the field have done a reasonably good job of respecting the diversity in the performing arts. Presentations at major performing arts medicine meetings and articles published in *MPPA* and elsewhere have covered problems related to virtually all of the modern orchestral instruments, a number of nonorchestral instruments, several singing styles, numerous dance traditions, and a smattering of theatrical issues. We have focused on problems of performers at both ends of the age spectrum, and we have some useful information on the effect of gender on risk of injury. We have examined these problems from the perspective of numerous specialty fields in health care as well as from the performer’s and pedagogue’s perspectives.

But if we look a bit more carefully at our field, we see a somewhat less diverse picture. For a variety of reasons, most (but not all) of the work we have done over the last quarter century has focused on the problems encountered by those who perform “classical” music and dance. I am as guilty of this charge as anyone in the field, probably for the same reasons as others. It is the problem illustrated by the story of the inebriated man who is looking for his lost keys at night under a streetlight—When asked what he thinks happened to them, he says that they fell out of his coat pocket when he stumbled over an object in the dark about 20 yards away. Trying to be helpful, a passer-by suggests that he go look where he fell. To which the man replies, “But the light is much better over here.”

Why has the light been shining more brightly on classical music and dance? In large part, this focus probably owes to the fact that most of the larger and better established performing arts organizations are devoted to these better established arts traditions. It is much less difficult to study a group of students in a music school or musicians in a professional orchestra than it is to track down a similar number of pop musicians and follow them over time. Several dozen to several hundred classical musicians show up at the same place for months to years at a time; non-classical musicians tend to gather in smaller groups and often move around more.

This situation is problematic for at least two reasons.

1. One is obvious: we do not know as much about non-classical musicians as we do about classical musicians (although the disparity is probably somewhat less for dancers).
2. The second part is that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity is typically more prevalent in the non-classical world, especially as it relates to historical, underrepresented minorities. It does not have to be that way, but in many communities that is what happens.

Both of these problems should make us rethink our future plans for the field. While it may be harder to collect data on non-classical performers, it is essential that we make the effort in order to maintain (create?) our credibility with that segment of the performer population. It is equally important for us to reach out to less advantaged populations of dancers, musicians, and other performing artists, because they

are just as deserving of competent care as anyone else and because we know that (in the US) they face an uphill battle to access any type of health care. This outreach activity should include providing primary and specialty care, disseminating health information, and advocating for health policy changes that will decrease the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged performers. At the same time, we should shine some of our research light on these underserved populations so that we can identify and meet their needs as well as we do for others.

For starters, we should at least take a look at the effect of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status on the risk of injury for classical performers. I am not aware of any substantial body of data on this topic in our literature, especially for musicians. While some groups are truly under-represented, others (e.g., Asian-Americans in orchestras and African-Americans in some dance companies) are present in large enough numbers to make such research feasible. A next step might be to look at the effect of socioeconomic status on injury risk and outcomes. Then, it will be time to move onto less comfortable domains involving other forms of artistic expression and other populations of performers.

Looking at these bio-socio-cultural dimensions of performers' health prob-

lems will benefit all performing artists, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The findings will almost certainly shed light on the basic biology of the injury process as it relates to anyone with any genetic makeup or social station. In the future, the ability to draw on the results of human genome research will give us more powerful spotlights to combine with the epidemiologic, physiologic, and biomechanical studies that we can do today.

By the way, I want to disclose how one of the articles in this issue, *by Taylor Buckley and myself*, which does focus on a non-classical group of musicians, was handled in the editorial review process. Because I am co-author of the article, I asked Editor Emerita Alice Brandfonbrener to assume full editorial control of the review process and the decision whether or not to publish. She graciously agreed to do so, and the published paper reflects the useful suggestions that came out of that review process.

The Buckley paper focuses on a group of amateur bluegrass musicians who attend a summer music camp. Other examples of studies published in MPPA in recent years that have focused on non-classical performers include the Hoffman and Curk papers in this issue, which include non-classical percussionists in their investigations of

hearing loss; Scialom's paper in the last issue that looked at Brazilian dancers; and Barr's examination of bagpipers in the December issue; in addition, Susan Raeburn has published a number of articles on jazz and rock performers. Nonetheless, we still know little about the effect of race on the risk of performance-related injuries.

In closing, let me comment on how doing the best we possibly can to make performing arts medicine reflect the diversity of the human experience might save the world. If the performing arts are truly some of the most important ways we have to communicate the pathos of our existence, then we need to help everyone on the planet who has a message on this crucial subject to express it. Inevitably, some performers will encounter health problems that interfere with their ability to perform. It does not matter whether the performance is in the northern or southern hemisphere, whether it involves sound or motion or both, or whether the audience is one person or one million. Each and every one of those performances needs to go on, and we need to make sure that each and every performer is ready. That may do a little bit to help save the world.

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