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Claire Carswell: Visceral and aesthetic imagery

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Claire Carswell is a PhD student and registered mental health nurse, whose research project is a unique blend of art, science and health. Her PhD is a feasibility and pilot trial looking at the use of art to improve the mental health and wellbeing of patients with end-stage kidney disease whilst receiving haemodialysis. In order to facilitate the development and implementation of the arts-based intervention the interdisciplinary group of artists, patients, healthcare professionals and academics who provided guidance and advice throughout the project, recommended Claire develop a personal arts practice throughout her PhD.

The arts practice focused almost exclusively on medical imagery as personal interest in the subject matter helped maintain motivation and engagement. This resulted in Claire channelling her interest in science, anatomy and pathology into the art she was creating. The images were transformed from being clinical and graphic into something aesthetic by focussing on texture, colour, light and dark; in an attempt to create hyper-realistic illustrations. It also involved further exploration of the medical cases attached to each image to understand the underlying pathophysiology, presentation or management of the condition or injury. The arts practice had another unintended parallel benefit of allowing Claire to incorporate self-compassion into her approach not only to her own artwork, but also the participants who took part in her PhD project. Each piece was viewed as a process, an opportunity to practice technical skills and experiment with different techniques, as opposed to placing importance on the final product.

The results were a collection of visceral images created with coloured pencils, capturing a variety of different medical conditions and traumatic injuries.

Subarachnoid haemorrhage. A subarachnoid haemorrhage is a form of stroke where bleeding occurs on the surface of the brain.

Caesarean section with umbilical cord entanglement. In this case of an umbilical cord complication during labour the cord was wrapped around the baby's abdomen in multiple loops.

Subdural haematoma with coexisting subarachnoid haemorrhage. A subdural haematoma occurs when blood collects between the skull and the surface of the brain, in this case it co-occurred with a subarachnoid haemorrhage following head trauma.

Cholelithiasis. Cholelithiasis is characterised by the presence of gallstones in the gallbladder, in this case the formation of a significant amount of cholesterol stones necessitated the removal of the gallbladder due to cholecystitis (inflammation of the gallbladder).

Orbital fat prolapse. An orbital fat prolapse is a yellowish, fatty mass in the conjunctiva caused by herniation of intraconal fat, related to aging or surgical trauma.