Why we need more poetry in palliative care

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I was first provoked to consider the role of poetry in palliative care by an editorial for the Christmas 2013 *BMJ.* I like reading and writing poetry, but until then I had not questioned why so few journals published it. This edition, however, offered an explanation, or even a defence:

*Unlike religion, animal work and poetry are routinely excluded from the journal because we’re frightened of opening the floodgates. (More people want to write poetry than read it. Discuss.) [1](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R1)*

What a marvellous metaphor—‘Opening the floodgates’—as if editorial policy might somehow hold poets in check. The observation that more people like to write than read poetry is possibly true, but surely could the same be said of research papers? In fact, a search through the online archives of *The BMJ* revealed hundreds of articles mentioning poetry, including the obituaries of doctors who read or wrote it, and poetry collection reviews, but also a former editor’s quip:

*We’ve been publishing bad science for years. But bad poetry would be a really new departure. [2](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R2)*

So if an editor’s problem is how to sort good research from the bad, how might poems be selected? One *BMJ* experiment was to use the acronym ‘POEMS’ (Patient Orientated Evidence that Matters) as a means of conveying clinical research results in short, pithy ways.[3](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R3) These pieces appeared alongside the editor’s choice and seemed quite popular. For Christmas 2013, the journal commissioned Haiku poems—a Japanese form in three lines of text of five, seven and five syllables only to depict a moment of perception. These were to describe research findings, which it called ‘a poetic form of tweeting’.[4](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R4) One poem by Jeremy Holmes shows the potential of weaving medicine and poetry together:

*Fit, fruit-fed, no cigs:*

*Old able. Autumn leaves fall*

*Slowly, gracefully [4](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R4)*

Short poems are attractive, but to focus on brevity alone feels constraining. Poetry and research do share a craft in writing that seeks to represent reality, to generalise and catch an audience, but poetry is also vulnerable and elusive, puts into words what others sense but cannot convey, speaks to many meanings and, if it is good, survives far longer.

One example of an English poem with enduring appeal is Auden’s poem *Funeral blues*,[5](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R5) which the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* promoted further, which led to it being used more often at funerals.[6](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R6) There are also many funeral poem websites to help people find the right one for loved ones.[7](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R7) Outside of funerals, however, there seems some fear that poetry may be going out of fashion. It is difficult to find recent hard data on the epidemiology of poetry reading in the UK, but the proportion of people reporting reading it appears to have declined in the USA.[8](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R8) These figures are tricky to interpret because the way poetry is read—more often on the internet or at performances—has also recently changed. But part of the response to suspicions of a declining interest has been a range of national and international initiatives to read, discuss and get poetry into the classroom in accessible forms.[9](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R9) Stephen Fry—an English actor and broadcaster who has had an enormous Twitter following—has encouraged people to understand and write formal verse,[10](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R10)while writer and broadcaster Clive James has published a popular collection of poems reflecting on his response to a life-threatening illness.[11](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R11)

In this article, I use palliative care to explore the potential use of poetry in healthcare. As a multidisciplinary area of practice, palliative care seems particularly suited to poetry because its practitioners seek to work in an explicitly holistic and empathic therapeutic manner. It is also an area that promotes us to reflect on the loss of those we love or care for, and on our own deaths. The recent popularity of first-person narrative works about the end of life has emphasised the potential that powerful creative writing has to raise awareness of the importance of palliative care.[12 13](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R12) This synthesis is informed by searches of Medline, the websites of poetry, professional, policy and other organisations, but is a narrative review and synthesis rather than a formal systematic review. It is best seen as a reflection on and proposal of themes for understanding how health professionals and patients may draw on and use poetry in supportive and palliative care.

[Go to:](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#)

## Poetry for people with serious illness or nearing the end of life

The final theme is how poetry may provide spiritual and psychological benefit for those who are very ill or nearing the end of life. For many people, poetry is just not their thing or school experiences have put them off, but for others early teaching may leave a kernel of interest, perhaps only dimly perceived, which can be returned to and opened later in life. For example, Tamba describes using traditional Japanese Haiku and Tanka techniques to compose new poems that acknowledge the achievements and anxiety of his dying patients and their families’ grief.[37](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R37) Some like Clive James[11](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R11) have always written poetry and may return to this after a serious illness. For those who enjoy reading poetry, discussing or writing it can become a means of expressing emotion, making sense of events and putting a biographical story together. Clare Wilmot, Medical Director of North Country Home in New Hampshire, lived through a serious malignant illness that left her exhausted, dispirited and unable to care for herself.[38](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R38) She describes what happened when, under the care of the palliative care team, the poet in residence at Shands Centre in Florida spent an hour helping with her writing.

*Little by little I built up a compendium of poems that addressed what I was suffering. I shared these with the poet and eventually my family. The feedback was enchanting and encouraged another round of verse. The quality of the poetry was no measure of its effectiveness, but the effect of writing resulted in my being able to eat, because the act of expressing myself left me feeling better at mealtimes.[38](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R38)*

Pennebaker has long proposed that expressive writing can allow people to deal with difficult emotions in a way that helps coping and brings coherence in the face of disruptive events.[39](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R39) A review of the evidence in health suggested that ‘Finding one’s voice via poetic means can be a healing process because it opens up the opportunity for self-expression not otherwise felt through everyday words’.[40](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R40)

However, the evidence base for formal poetry therapy is mostly case reports or expert opinion from the USA, suggesting the need for more robust qualitative research.[41](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R41) This would mean the more systematic collection of reflections like those from Claire Wilmot.[38](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R38) One other interesting example of using poetry is a short poem as a mantra to help patients manage their breathing as one part of a palliative care package for breathlessness.[42](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R42) Poetry for the relatives and friends of people who are nearing the end of life was not a focus for this review, but it is an area warranting further investigation. As well as providing solace to caregivers one narrative analysis study has shown how it may be possible by synthesising caregivers’ journal entries to create poems that give insight into the sense of chaos, anxiety and hope they experience.[43](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R43)

So I hope I have explained why we need more poetry in palliative care and why poetry need not be seen solely as an extracurricular pursuit. In an increasingly secular world, poetry can be an important way of seeking meaning, finding some pleasure in situation, a connection with others and a means of raising awareness of the importance of good medical and supportive care. It might also be useful for sustaining health professionals’ well-being through good leadership and organisational culture, and as a method for wider public engagement. More comprehensive and robust models for the evaluation of arts in healthcare are now emerging.[44](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6104682/#R44) I propose we are now at the point where we should develop and introduce imaginative poetry interventions and study their effects more systematically. It is time to try ‘Opening the floodgates’ just a bit.