

The art on prescription international conference, Athens (13–15 March 2026): a reflexive participant account

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Introduction

The International Conference on Art on Prescription took place in Athens, Greece, from 13–15 March 2026, marking a historical milestone in the development of cultural prescribing in Europe. The conference was inaugurated by the Minister of Culture Dr Lina Mendoni and the Minister of Health Adonis Georgiadis, alongside the Head of the WHO Office in Greece (name), and featured internationally renowned experts in Arts & Health and Creative Arts Therapies, including Prof Dr. Daisy Fancourt, Dr Nils Fietje, Prof Dr. Vicky Karkou, Cornelia Kiss, Edith Wolf Perez, and Urian, among other European stakeholders.

The conference was organised by the Greek Ministry of Culture and the scientific coordination was provided by the University Mental Health, Neurosciences, & Precision Medicine Research Institute 'Costas Stefanis'. The focus of the conference was on presenting the Greek National Art on Prescription Programme and its evidence-based outcomes headed by Professor Dr Nikos Stefanis and the programme's research team. The central theme was the integration of artistic practices within cultural institutions as a complementary intervention for individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

As a psychologist and art psychotherapist working within mental health services, and as a researcher exploring the intersections of arts and health, I engaged with Arts on Prescription in both professional and research capacities. I also had the opportunity to work as a senior mental health practitioner in the Arts on Prescription Pilot Programme throughout the research Pilot Phase. This report offers a reflective account of my experience as a conference participant, highlighting key themes, findings, and implications. Its aim is to critically examine the conference's contributions to the development of Arts on Prescription, as well as its relevance to arts therapies practice. The report draws on participant observation and a synthesis of conference presentations and discussions.

Overall experience & atmosphere

The conference was both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant, reflecting the interdisciplinary

nature of the Arts on Prescription programme. Attendees included artists, mental health professionals, researchers, policymakers and people with personal experience of mental health issues. This diversity fostered rich dialogue and exchange of ideas.

A defining feature was the integration of health, culture, and policy. Rather than treating art and mental health as distinct fields, the programme recognised culture as an integral part of care. Presentations moved between clinical research, artistic practice and policy frameworks, illustrating the complexity and potential of the national implementation.

Key insights & research results

Culture as health intervention

The presentation of findings from the Greek National Arts on Prescription Programme, constituted a central focus of the conference. As one of the largest randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in Europe, the study – still under publication – offered significant evidence supporting the integration of artistic practices into mental healthcare [4], [2].

The programme employed a mixed-methods design. A total of 105 mental health services referred users to 21 cultural organisations, which delivered 41 structured artistic interventions by 118 professionals, including mental health practitioners and artists.

A total of 1,026 participants engaged in three-month group programmes including theatre, cinema, dance, visual arts, music, photography and museum-based activities. Each intervention combined artistic practice with facilitated reflection within a structured social prescribing pathway [1].

Results from two randomised controlled trials (RCTs) involving 925 participants (REFs) showed greater improvements in mental health and well-being compared to treatment as usual. These improvements included reductions in depression and anxiety, as well as enhanced well-being. These results establish Arts on Prescription as a structured psychosocial intervention with a measurable impact.

Qualitative findings highlighted three key processes: Firstly, *reactivation* of the subject, which is a shift from a passive patient identity towards agency and creative engagement. Secondly, *transformative collectivity* was identified, which is characterised by enhanced social connectedness and meaningful group belonging. The group emerged as a space of genuine connection and transformation. Thirdly, there was a *spillover effect*, with benefits extending beyond sessions and increasing motivation and everyday engagement. These processes were reflected in collective drawings. Shared drawings revealed recurring symbolic patterns, including representations of well-being (e.g. nature, light and movement), hope (e.g. horizons and pathways) and visual interconnections between contributions. These images functioned as relational maps, making emerging bonds and shared meanings visible. In this sense, the collective image operated as a shared symbolic space in which individual expressions were captured and reintegrated within a group matrix.

These processes resonate with psychodynamic understandings of symbolic expression and the emergence of the self through play [5], while also emphasising the importance of group dynamics within a relational context. They are further supported by evidence from the arts therapies field demonstrating the contribution of artistic processes to psychological and relational outcomes [3]. Crucially, the arts were not reduced to purely instrumental tools, but rather retained their open-ended, process-oriented nature within structured interventions. Nevertheless, Arts on Prescription should be distinguished from formal psychotherapy, since its primary objectives are participation, engagement and well-being, rather than clinical treatment.

Policy & system integration

One of the most significant developments presented at the conference was the formal integration of Art on Prescription into the Greek public healthcare system. A Joint Ministerial Decision, signed on 10 March 2026 by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Health, enables psychiatrists and child psychiatrists to prescribe participation in artistic programmes through the National Health System.

This development marks a historic milestone, positioning Greece among the first European countries, following the United Kingdom, and the first EU-country to formally institutionalise cultural prescribing within public healthcare. A key component of this integration is the planned incorporation of cultural prescription into digital health systems. This will allow mental health professionals to refer patients to artistic programmes through structured and traceable pathways, enhancing both accessibility and scalability. Such integration represents a critical step toward embedding Arts on Prescription within routine clinical practice, moving beyond pilot initiatives toward systemic implementation.

At the same time, conference discussions highlighted important challenges. These include the need for effective coordination between sectors, the development of clear referral mechanisms, and the engagement of healthcare professionals who may be unfamiliar with arts-based approaches. Awareness-raising initiatives targeting psychiatrists and other clinicians were identified as essential to ensure that cultural prescribing is actively utilised. Overall, Art on Prescription was framed as part of a broader shift toward integrated care models that incorporate emotional, social, and cultural dimensions alongside biomedical treatment.

Lived experience & participation

Lived experience played a central role. Rather than being passive recipients, participants were positioned as active contributors. Through testimonials, participants described their transition to becoming cultural agents. Artistic engagement enabled them to create meaning, supporting identity reconstruction and a sense of belonging. The following participant quotes capture this sentiment:

"I exist."

"They wanted me to be there."

"For the first time I felt like a first-class citizen."

These accounts highlight the psychological and social impact of the programme and the role of cultural spaces in fostering inclusion.

Highlights from the programme

Sessions on cultural institutions as spaces of care had a particularly strong impact. Museums, theatres and concert halls were reimagined as places that encourage reflection, creativity and connection. Panels on collaboration between artists and mental health professionals emphasised the importance of mutual understanding and flexibility between different fields. The focus was on art as a relational and transformative process rather than merely a means to clinical outcomes.

Reflections on the Greek context

The Greek model is a unique development in Europe. Its rapid implementation, supported by policy and cross-sector collaboration, demonstrates a commitment to innovation. Despite operating within structural constraints, the programme demonstrates the potential of alternative care models. Compared to more established systems, it is still in its infancy, offering opportunities for culturally adaptive development. Proposed future developments include expanding local cultural networks, establishing liaison roles to support coordination and launching awareness initiatives for clinicians.

Personal & professional takeaways

The conference emphasised that artistic processes are spaces for symbolic expression, relational engagement and the reorganisation of experience. Arts on Prescription supports shifts in identity, agency, and connection, offering more than just symptom reduction.

This emphasises the importance of incorporating creative and relational elements into mental healthcare and raises questions about how to evaluate such processes without oversimplifying them.

My understanding of Art on Prescription as a bridge between cultural participation and care was strengthened by the experience. These findings are relevant to the field of arts therapies, demonstrating how artistic processes can operate within public health frameworks while retaining symbolic and relational depth. They also prompt reflection on the role and contribution of arts therapists in interdisciplinary settings.

Conclusion

The conference represented a significant milestone in the integration of culture and healthcare in Greece, in Europe, and beyond. It showcased the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration to generate innovative, human-centred approaches to mental health. Although challenges remain, the programme shows great promise. Its success in the future will depend on sustained collaboration, evaluation and policy support. Ultimately, the conference suggests that the future of mental healthcare depends not only on what or how we treat, but also on how we create conditions that make individuals feel connected, recognised and meaningfully engaged.

Key policy-making messages

- Arts on Prescription represents a paradigm shift toward holistic, person-centred care.
- Cultural participation plays a vital role in promoting mental health and fostering social inclusion.
- Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for the sustainable implementation of such programmes.
- The development of robust evaluation frameworks, alongside targeted training for cultural venues and professionals, is crucial to ensure quality, accountability, and long-term sustainability.
- Securing stable, long-term funding and embedding Arts on Prescription within policy frameworks are key to its continuity and impact.
- Comprehensive awareness-raising initiatives are necessary to ensure that psychiatrists actively prescribe these programmes, thereby supporting their sustained uptake.

- Expanding access across regions and diverse populations requires locally tailored strategies (i.e. municipal local cultural centres) and community-based approaches.

Notes

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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