

The art and science of healing

Hospitals are often considered sterile places but that all changes, writes ANGELA BENSTED, when art and medicine collide.

Visitors to Brisbane's St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital might have noticed a quiet transformation over the past five years, as drab corridors have come alive with an evolving contemporary art display.

The collection's unlikely curator is gynaecologist Dr Philip Hall who started practicing there five years ago.

"This is a fabulous hospital with really high-tech, cutting edge medicine," the specialist in pelvic reconstruction says.

Unfortunately he could not say the same about the generic, rented art on the walls when he arrived.

"All my life I've had interest in having interesting, beautiful, evocative things around me," Dr Hall says.

He convinced the hospital to hand over its art budget and began collecting, focusing on indigenous works.

Dr Hall and his wife Lesley also loaned many pieces from



Dr Philip Hall with St Andrew's Hospital artist-in-residence Ali Bezer.

their own large collection and convinced friends, colleagues and some private galleries to do the same.

"I've had enormous support from the hospital administration, which is very keen on humanising the hospital and making the patient experience very positive," Dr Hall says. "They accept that it's more than just pure technical medicine that takes place in a

healing space such as this."

These dual roles of surgeon and curator are not really surprising.

Dr Hall retired from his Victorian practice and moved to Brisbane seven years ago to fulfil a long-held ambition to be an artist.

Unfortunately his passion for art did not translate to skill with the brush and, after a couple of years at Griffith

University's fine art school, he realised he was "never going to be an artist of any sort of proportions".

Ultimately his love of art sent him back to medicine.

"When I stopped working in medicine my income stopped and I stopped buying art," he says.

"I decided I was probably better to be someone who supported working artists with skill to be able to have their work seen around the place."

But his student experience had sown the seed of a broader vision.

"I felt there was a need for the hospital, as part of its living values, to engage with young professional artists, to give them space on our gigantic walls," Dr Hall says.

He lobbied the hospital to create an art prize for Griffith University honours students, with an exhibition of prize contenders. The winner's work is then added to the hospital's

collection for all to enjoy.

The hospital has also introduced an artist-in-residence program this year, with dedicated studio space for an artist to create and install works.

Philip is proud of what the hospital is achieving with a limited budget.

"We've got living, contemporary art in a working space where we try to make people better," he says.

He's also touched by the staff response to his efforts.

"I have three or four conversations a day; with nurses, catering staff, engineers – people who would probably never go to a public gallery, who certainly wouldn't go to a private gallery, but who are so keen to respond to what's on our walls here," he says.

"Not every painting I put up is liked which is part of the fun of it all.

"It's got people responding to their environment."

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