

2011 International Symposium on Poetry and Medicine

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Medical Teaching Centre, University of Warwick

ABSTRACT – ROGAN WOLF



Poems in Public on the Frontier

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“Poems for...” is a project that offers small poster-poems for public display, free of charge. They can be downloaded from www.poemsfor.org The first aim was for the poems to appear in health and social care settings, to offer an I-Thou statement of community and empathic recognition to the multi-ethnic gathering present on both sides of the reception desk. Its initial title was accordingly “Poems for the Waiting Room.” During the ten years of its existence, the project has been funded by the Arts Council, the NHS, the Kings Fund, the Mayor of London, the John Lewis Partnership and the Foreign Office. When funding permits, new collections are produced. Since 1994 these have tended to focus on bilingual poems. The latest collection, produced last Summer, brought the total number of languages represented to 50, each short poem having its English translation alongside. Since the diversity theme was introduced, the main demand for the poems has come from schools and libraries. Hence the project’s change of title to “Poems for...” My presentation will provide more detail on the project. It will also offer some thoughts on the movements and developments from which the project seems to have benefited and which it partly reflects – the returning popularity of poetry as a public rather than a largely “private” and bookish art, the arts-health movement with its various influences and sources, translation and the bilingual as a way not just of speaking across national and cultural frontiers but as a new way simply of speaking. The talk will conclude by exploring the notion of frontiers of a different kind. Healthcare staff stand and work at frontiers of human experience which run not just through all societies, but through every individual – dividing wellness and illness, living and dying, able and disabled, control and uncontrol, sense and no sense, power and powerlessness. Profound dread and prejudice is common at those frontiers and healthcare professionals, functioning right there through every working day, are not immune. Can the reading of poetry in staff training and supervision play a part in keeping those frontiers open to empathy and relationship skills? Some examples will be offered.