

'My Journey' – expression, wellbeing and awareness through art

Background to the project

With the support of a £4,000 grant from NHS Lothian Charity Specific Funds, Sharlene, Renal Young Adult Support Worker at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, collaborated with Hans from NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts team to develop an arts-based wellbeing project involving young adults (age 16–35) living with renal conditions to address the high levels of social isolation and low levels of wellbeing they report. The project created an opportunity for participants to engage in creative activities in a supportive environment, enabling them to focus on their wellbeing, articulate their feelings about living with kidney disease and build peer connections outside of the hospital setting. The project also aimed to raise awareness of renal conditions in young people and highlight the wider impact these conditions can have on their lives.

Collaboration in action

Together, Sharlene and the young people agreed on the project's vision and direction. Hans provided initial guidance on how to progress the idea, including signposting Sharlene to NHS Lothian Charity for funding and offering support with the application process. He also identified and commissioned Fiona, an artist based at [Edinburgh Printmakers](#), who has prior experience working with the Tonic Arts programme and delivering creative projects with community groups giving them a voice and supporting them to build confidence.

It's been great to be able to spend time with friends who know how it feels to have CKD without us being in a clinical setting."

- Young adult renal patient

It has increased my confidence by leaps and bounds, increasing my overall wellness."

- Young adult renal patient



Artwork on display at RIE



The workshop, Edinburgh Printmakers

The workshops

Seven young adult renal patients worked closely with Fiona in an 8-week workshop series at Edinburgh Printmakers studio. They learned and developed new skills, including printmaking, and experimented with tools and techniques to create the final exhibition pieces. The group setting encouraged idea-sharing and peer connection. Holding sessions outside the hospital supported greater self-expression, independence and increased confidence.

The showcase event

The participants chose to name the collection, 'My Journey'. Sharlene organised a showcase event at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh to celebrate the project and raise awareness ahead of the exhibition. Approx. 60 patients, family members, and healthcare professionals attended, providing an opportunity to view the artwork and engage with the artists about their pieces.



The group in front of the exhibition



The exhibition, RIE

The exhibition


Hans framed the artworks, with participants providing accompanying text to reflect their pieces. The collection was exhibited in the Tonic Arts Gallery at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh from October 2025 to April 2026, making it accessible to patients, staff, and visitors. After this, 'My Journey' exhibition will tour the gallery spaces in NHS Lothian hospitals.


Improving wellbeing

Art as a therapeutic support

Art provided a powerful and accessible way for young adults living with renal conditions to express thoughts and emotions that can often be difficult to put into words. Through making creative choices, such as selecting colours, shaping composition, or experimenting with materials at the workshops, participants are given a sense of control and ownership over their work. This process builds confidence in their ability to make decisions and communicate their experiences and identity beyond their condition. In turn, this growing confidence can extend into other areas of their lives, supporting them to express their needs, preferences, and feelings more openly, including in conversations about their healthcare and wellbeing.

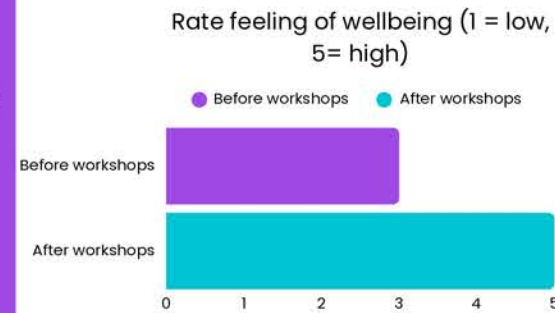
 Art activities give patients like me an alternative way to explore and express our emotions. Art can say so much more than reading or listening to someone's story." - Young adult renal patient


 Art transforms ideas and gives you perspective. Art helps me to refined my thoughts , ideas and memories." - Young adult renal patient


 Being able to express myself in ways I hadn't before...and has helped me come to terms with and accept my condition." - Young adult renal patient

 I have witnessed this group of young people become more open about their experiences and feelings and the impact of their conditions on their lives." - Fiona, workshop artist

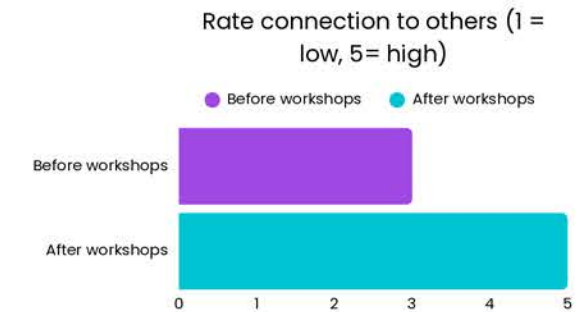
Increased wellbeing





 I used different colors to represent how my transplant life felt. To me, the project has helped my wellbeing by helping me to express myself." - Young adult renal patient

 Art has helped reduce stress which I think we all know is good in general, it's also just a great laugh doing it in a group or yourself." - Young adult renal patient

Increased connection




 Life is stressful at the moment, I am not finding the time to meet with and connect with other people which I know is usually a help to me so the art classes are a good push for me." - Young adult renal patient

 Good to get me out the house. Stops me thinking I am just a patient as I meet and do things as a group. I don't think about clinical stuff while at the art group." - Young adult renal patient

Increased confidence



 Learning new things to express my experience through a new mode was very interesting. Doing it with people I know helps my communication skills and improved my confidence." - Young adult renal patient

 These workshops have really increased my son's confidence and social skills, and I am so pleased he now has a group of other young people he can class as really good friends." - Family member

Increasing awareness and understanding

Art to raise awareness and understanding

The exhibition raises awareness of kidney disease by sharing the lived experiences of young people through their artwork and personal reflections, making the emotional, social and physical impacts more visible and accessible. Displayed within a hospital setting, it not only informs patients, families and visitors, but also deepens medical staff's understanding of the individuals they care for. By offering insights beyond clinical interactions, staff working with this group of patients highlighted how this project supports more person-centred care.



Patient viewing the exhibition

Impact on staff in the renal department: supporting person-centred care

The art pieces are so powerful, it really gives me perspective... looking at the pieces and reading their words makes me understand actually this is their entire world.”

-Renal Department staff member

One of my patients is here tonight [at showcase event], she struggles with many health conditions and has a lot of hospital admissions. Tonight I have seen her beyond a patient in a medical sense.”

-Renal Department staff member

I have known some of these patients for a few years and tonight [at showcase event] I have seen them in a whole new light. It's unbelievable how they have managed to express and articulate, through art, how this journey has been for them.”

-Renal Department staff member

I see them for who they are...the art project has given them the opportunity to be acknowledged in another way.”

-Renal Department staff member

Impact on people viewing exhibition: increasing awareness and understanding

Within the art I can see their hopes, fears and struggles, young people who want to live a full and enriched life who are confronted with chronic disease, exhaustion and feeling held back. I can also see their personalities and identities in the work and above all their hope.”

-Staff member

It provides a unique perspective on the impact of their renal disease in a very personal & informative way.”

-Staff member

I personally found it very moving, and it does give me an insight into the struggles of a chronic kidney condition.”

-Patient

It is clear to see how much it has aided the young people in building confidence in their own abilities.”

-Staff member

Thank you so much for providing the exhibition, cheered me and my 7 year old up on my 6 night stay and gave us something to chat about.”

-Patient

How to see the exhibition

The 'My Journey' artworks are now included as part of NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts exhibitions programme and will be displayed throughout NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts galleries at NHS Lothian hospitals. More information can be found on [NHS Lothian Charity Tonic Arts website](#). Thank you to Sharlene, Hans, the young adults and staff for supporting this evaluation.

Report compiled by Rebecca Caulfield, Evaluation Manager, NHS Lothian Charity