



## Aesop's Dance to Health

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### Keywords

*Creative health,  
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Arts Enterprise with a Social Purpose (Aesop) was established by Tim Joss in 2014. Aesop is a social enterprise and charity dedicated to solving problems in society through effective and high-quality evidence-led arts interventions. Dance to Health is a pioneering nationwide falls prevention dance programme for older people, and was developed and evaluated in collaboration with London School of Economics, the University of Glasgow, University College London, Canterbury Christ Church University, Sheffield Hallam University, Middlesex University and Swansea University.

### Context

This case study sets out how a successful process of knowledge exchange between the arts and health sectors and how Higher Education was facilitated and harnessed by a charity. Arts Enterprise with a Social Purpose (Aesop) develops arts solutions based on social needs, which they refer to as a society-pull approach rather than an arts-push approach. Whereas most arts organisations begin with a strong artistic vision or commitment to a particular practice, Aesop's commitment lies with finding arts-based solutions to a particular social problem and accelerating the adoption and scaling up of that solution. Aesop is uniquely positioned as a facilitator of evidence-based arts solutions to social needs, acting as a bridge between different sectors. The charity's connections to research and higher education also facilitate the opportunity to win substantial funding and investment. Collaborating with Higher Education has enabled Aesop to provide robust evidence to underpin the benefits that arts-health intervention programmes can bring to individuals, communities and society as a whole.



*Aesop Arts & Health Conference, Southbank Centre.  
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Dance to Health was the first arts-health programme developed by Aesop, after a possible crossover between falls-prevention and creative dance was identified in 2015. Around this time, Age UK estimated that treatment for older peoples' falls costs the health system over £3 billion a year. From investigating the research evidence base, Aesop discovered that the preventative physiotherapy delivered by the NHS had a very low completion rate. Of the older people participating in the 26-week physiotherapy programme, 81% would drop out before 12 weeks. So Tim Joss, who was previously a dance officer at Arts Council England, had the idea of smuggling physiotherapy exercises into creative dance. Aesop brought together falls prevention leaders and community dance practitioners into a dance studio and what emerged was the start of a co-produced community dance-physiotherapy programme with a strong emphasis on creativity. It was important for Aesop to leave scope for co-production within the programme, so that the participants could influence the activities through their own dance passions, their music tastes and creative ideas.

## **The programme**

A pilot programme was undertaken in collaboration with Canterbury Christ Church University and an evaluation was produced which provided evidence of the potential for positive outcomes in terms of preventative dance-physiotherapy and subsequently the financial benefit to the NHS. After this initial pilot, in 2017 Aesop secured £2.1million in funding for an

innovation phase roll-out around the UK, financed through National Community Lottery Fund (45%), charitable foundations (14%), Nesta 'Second Half Fund' (12%), Aged Veterans Fund (11%) and the health sector (8%). Dance artists were trained to achieve a falls prevention exercise qualification, and were then shown how to weave those exercises through creative dance routines.

*Dance Artist Jenny Macnamara. ©2024 Aesop Arts & Society*



Sheffield Hallam University tracked the progress of this innovation phase and produced a report which detailed that Dance to Health reduces falls by 58%. Aesop's community development objective was to create volunteer-led, financially sustainable Local Groups, and a separate volunteering evaluation revealed strong evidence that participant outcomes would be weaker without the role of volunteers. Phase 1 also generated significant intellectual property and included a successful application for Dance to Health to be a registered trademark. In 2020 The three-year evaluation report from Sheffield Hallam University was published, highlighting dramatic evidence of Dance to Health's efficacy. Following the wind-down of the pandemic, phase 2 of the programme's roll-out began in 2022. The transition from grant-funded innovation to social enterprise financed through earned income began at this stage, making Aesop a pioneer in the new sector of arts-health social enterprises.

In 2023 Aesop won a large grant from Innovate UK as part of the UKRI Healthy Ageing Scaling Social Ventures programme. Their bid stated that ‘there is no arts-based programme for the health sector which has evidence of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness and is available for all who need it.’ Through this grant Aesop received funding for research and development to: develop the community board, create an online library of films for people in care homes, understand more about the older person’s voice in the development of falls prevention policy and to ensure a flow of trained dance artists to deliver the programme. In 2023 Dance to Health was also chosen as one of six key innovations in the NHS at a showcase with NHS England Chief Executive Amanda Pritchard.



*Aesop Arts & Health Conference, Southbank Centre  
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## **Wellbeing outcomes**

Dance to Health is a proven national medical intervention treatment, paid for by the NHS or a local authority, which is saving the NHS millions of pounds for every year that it continues. Aesop’s collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University produced evidence that Dance to Health reduces falls in the older population by 58%. Tim recounts how one participant came to their first session with a walking frame, and during the 26-week programme

they transitioned to two walking sticks, then one walking stick, before throwing the stick away. In addition to the physical benefits, being part of a group with an element of homogeneity and working towards a shared goal is known to be beneficial to mental wellbeing.

## The collaborative model

Aesop collaborated with Sheffield Hallam University to cost the health economics of the Dance to Health programme, which revealed potential savings of up to £98 million a year. Aesop have also worked with Middlesex University Business School on whether a social franchising model or licensing model would be a productive route to follow. Tim found that the most common response from the research community, when presented with the plan for Dance to Health, was to advise a Random Control Trial in order to provide evidence required by the health sector, but RCTs are very costly and time-consuming. However, other academic partners were supportive of developing different levels of evidence, such as expert opinion followed by statistically significant evaluation evidence.

Considering that most UK arts organisations are micro, employing five people or less, gathering evidence for the efficacy of arts interventions

*Dance to Health Volunteers*  
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through evaluation can be unachievable in terms of time, money and expertise. As Tim explained, working with universities can be productive for small organisations as they can offer the capacity needed for evaluations and economic costings.

The Aesop Institute was also established in 2019 through a collaboration with Canterbury Christ Church University's Faculty of Health and Well-being. It offers a professional development programme that caters for health and arts professionals with an interest in devising and running successful arts in health programmes. It provides university-accredited, quality-assured training that is tailored to personal learning requirements, designed to enable those working in the health or arts sectors to develop, sustain and grow successful arts in health programmes. In 2023, this led to the



*Chinese Community Centre,  
Birmingham ©2020 Aesop  
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launch of Prescribe Arts, a platform linking social prescribers with arts organisations nationally, and an accompanying Community of Practice, to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practice among the arts in the health sector.

## The Legacy of Dance to Health

Aesop has continued to win contracts for regional Dance to Health groups from the NHS and local authorities using a social franchising model. Funds are provided via the contracts for the first year of operation, before moving towards a sustainable model of local fundraising and participant subscription. Most of the groups are run by local volunteers and there are currently 22 regional groups in operation including a Birmingham Bangladeshi Women's Association and Chinese Community Centre Dance to Health groups.

Aesop has also designed a programme of online delivery, to increase provision across the UK. In addition to this, Dance to Health is generating more employment for dance artists. As Tim noted, although the main focus areas for Dance to Health are in South Wales and the West Midlands, there is not a single dance degree available in Welsh universities and they have also been cut at Coventry University and Wolverhampton University. Aesop is

*Tim Joss at the Aesop Arts & Health Conference, Southbank Centre ©2020 Aesop Arts & Society*



concerned with creating a flow of qualified dance artists, both to deliver the programme but also to sustain the sector more widely. As Tim told me, 'the art sector must not turn into an arts and social impact sector, but it needs alliances with organisations like Aesop, which know how to develop hu-

man-centred design, do the evidence collecting and then know how to scale. So where we're at at the moment is at the cusp of a new creative industry - an arts for social impact creative industry, which is financially sustained by other sectors.'

*This case study is dedicated to the memory of Tim Joss, who passed away in January 2024 following a cycling accident. It was written following an interview I did with Tim in 2023 and the keynote presentation he gave at our Annual Policy Workshop on Collaborations in Creative Health in June of the same year. Tim founded Aesop in 2014, on the principle of facilitating arts solutions to society's problems and made it into a driver of collaboration between the arts, health and social care, through research, national showcases, and a community of practice. A talented musician himself, Tim dedicated his working life to supporting and championing the arts sector and its practitioners. Prior to Aesop, Tim was Artistic Director and CEO of the Bath International Music Festival, and was a founder of other national organisations including the Bath Literature Festival, National Numeracy, and the Arts Impact Fund. In 2005, he was appointed a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government. Tim's unbounded generosity, energy and expertise were hugely inspirational. Our sincere thanks to the team at Aesop for their support in completing this case study.*

## **Additional information:**

Aesop: <https://ae-sop.org>

Dance to Health: <https://dancetohealth.org>

Listen to Tim discussing Dance to Health at our 2023 Annual Policy Workshop at: <https://on.soundcloud.com/JywLTFuD6HjDJ5ii8>

Aesop's collaborative evaluation reports can be found at Aesop Arts & Society: <https://ae-sop.org/resource>