

Arts in hospital: Handling the media

**Prepared by Josie Aston
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Meli Hatzihrysidis, Development Officer, Arts Council England and
Lara Dose, Director, National Network for the Arts in Health

About the author:

Josie Aston is the part-time Arts Co-ordinator for Bromley Hospitals NHS Trust in Kent. She also works freelance for clients including South Staffordshire Healthcare NHS Trust, the South Bank Centre, Arts Council England and Public Art South West. She is a member representative and mentor for the Arts Marketing Association. She was introduced to arts and health as a result of working for Tonic, the Arts and Environments programme for Leeds Teaching Hospitals during 1999-2002.

She held the post of Press and Marketing Manager for the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in London, during a two year period when the orchestra featured in national and international media including the BBC, ITV, New York Times and Reuters.

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Please send any additional comments to: josie.aston@gmail.com.

The information in this briefing sheet is general and offered without any legal responsibility. Always take professional advice if in doubt.

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Arts in hospital: Handling the media

This document is a general introduction to handling the media and is aimed particularly at colleagues who may not have had press responsibilities in previous jobs. If you are employed by an NHS Trust, all media contact should go through your Trust's communications department and you should seek their advice and support on all media issues. Below you'll find some suggestions for good practice when working with the media, to inform discussions with communications personnel and also to cover situations where you are working on arts and health projects as a freelance.

1. Introduction

Media coverage for your arts programme or project is important and useful. It provides welcome evidence for funders, supporters and directors of your Trust that the arts programme is doing good work. It can be a source of photographs and independent endorsements of your work, which you can use in your own publicity.

However, all media coverage, from the simplest picture story in your local newspaper to an in-depth feature on national radio, comes at a price, which is the work that you will have to put in to make it happen.

This will include: researching and writing press releases; setting up photo opportunities and looking after photographers when they visit your Trust, probably while trying to ensure that the arts activity is not disrupted; getting permission for quotes or photographs to be used; finding out any background information that journalists require; being interviewed yourself; obtaining and circulating cuttings or recordings of the coverage.

It is not compulsory to seek press coverage for every project. You may take a valid decision not to do so, because you have limited time, because it would disrupt the project, or in some situations, because you feel it may result in negative publicity. However, it is important to remember that you will not have a choice about managing your press coverage, should the media decide you are newsworthy for some reason.

2. Context

Hospitals are of great interest, not always positive, to the media and journalists are always looking for local illustrations of national issues such as MRSA, the availability or otherwise of new drug treatments, financial questions, and so on. The arts can provide a valuable opportunity to emphasise the positive aspects of patient care, and the human aspects of the health service. Local media often appreciate the ability of arts stories to provide a memorable photograph, particularly of projects which benefit young and elderly patients.

The challenge is to ensure that the media focus on the positive elements which the arts can bring into hospital rather than focusing the story on issues of funding – arts projects in the NHS are almost always funded from external sources, but this message has to be vigilantly put across and backed up with facts and information.

The question of NHS funding is highly politicised and the UK press are quick to pick up on any suggestion that NHS funds have been diverted from patient care. This is especially the case when Trusts are known to be in financial or other difficulties.

The national media have recently been taking an interest in arts in the health service; some of the coverage has mentioned the well-documented health benefits to patients and staff of attractive, comfortable hospital environments. However, the tabloid press have focused on value for money questions, particularly on large contemporary artworks commissioned by some central London teaching hospitals.

Therefore, it is important that all communications about the arts programme are very clear about the benefits to patients/service users of the arts projects and that the funding is separate from NHS budgets and generally comes from outside the NHS (with an explanation that NHS charitable funds do not come from government and are not spent on direct patient care, if necessary).

Photo calls should where possible focus on the patients/service users, rather than on the art, and artists' local links, if any, should be emphasised. If these points are dealt with effectively, then coverage will be positive and will focus on the many benefits to patients, staff and visitors which arts projects can bring.

3. Emphasising the positive

Firstly, know your place in the pecking order. Most of the national media in the UK is London-based and stories which occur within the M25 tend to take priority. Local press everywhere are often glad to run a story which has local appeal, with information taken directly from your press release.

Both national and local press appreciate a good photograph, and arts and health projects can often generate very striking pictures. Therefore, it's crucial to get good quality high resolution digital photographs of your project, and ideally to make them available online; availability of strong images can make a big difference to whether your project is covered or not, particularly in national media.

Choose a story which has a good picture opportunity, remembering of course to get signed photo permission forms for everyone featured. The normal practice

used to be that these were required for all patients or the parents / carers or patients aged under 18, but Trusts seem to be increasingly hedging their bets and getting permission forms for staff also. You will probably find photo permission forms on your Trust intranet, although you may wish to customise these so it's clear that the publicity is for the arts programme.

Make sure you include quotes from participants, hospital staff etc in press releases saying how much they appreciate the project. You can always quote yourself if you're stuck, or write something and get a colleague to agree they said it... ("Says Joanna Bloggs, Arts Co-ordinator, "The children really enjoyed the musician's visit and it gave them some positive distraction from their treatment; we're really grateful to Funding Organisation for making it possible.")

Stories involving children frequently receive positive coverage; however, be aware that children's wards tend to get lots of media attention already, and therefore, while staff will probably be used to dealing with the press, if you can get other departments such as elderly medicine covered, they may be much more pleased about it.

Senior staff at NHS Trusts are generally keenly aware of their organisation's image in the local press, and will be pleased to get positive coverage, as most articles tend to focus on the hospital's MRSA record, patients who have been waiting a long time for treatment or who have had a bad treatment outcome, controversial building plans etc. It is a good idea to regularly show copies of your clippings to your arts committee and to senior staff.

4. Avoiding / managing bad press

- i) Take an interest in what is going on in your Trust and in the health service generally. Read newsletters, annual reports, press releases and press clippings. Set up a Google alert for your Trust's name. Sign up for the free weekly news bulletin from Health Service Journal. You need to know what your Trust is doing well and less well at; the media may choose to focus on arts spending as general evidence of poor financial management, if the Trust is already in the news for having a deficit or for making staff redundant.
- ii) Get your facts straight now, before you are under any pressure. Make some bullet point lists about recent arts projects. Who set them up? Why? Who benefited? How much did they cost and who paid?
- iii) Talk to your communications department. Make sure they are aware of the benefits of any arts projects you are running and how they are funded, and that there has recently been negative coverage of arts and health.

- iv) Read your Trust's policy for handling bad news – this will probably be found in the Major Incident Briefing pack, or the communications department should have a copy. The same principles will apply to handling any press issue e.g. keep answers short and factual, decide in advance on the key points you're trying to get across, etc.
- v) Be available to talk to the press and if you are unavailable at times because you work part time or during holidays etc, make sure there is someone else the communications department can contact in your place. This could be a member of your steering group or a director or non-executive director. Remember press will often need a same-day response.

You should brief anyone who may talk to the press about the arts project with the information you collected in ii) above. You don't want the first time one of your directors hears of your Trust arts project to be when the Daily Mail is on the phone.

- vi) Be aware of the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act; your Trust will have a named person responsible for handling enquiries under the Act. However, bear in mind that you do not have to do any more than give the basic information the enquirer is asking for.

For example, the Sunday Telegraph and the Daily Mirror recently asked a number of NHS Trusts how much they have spent on artwork in the last three years and to detail all artwork purchases during the last 12 months. On reading the wording carefully, the enquiries only covered expenditure from NHS budgets, and therefore it was not necessary to list the artwork purchased from charitable donations and grants (the vast majority of the total).

- vii) Most of the critical media coverage has focused on the commissioning of contemporary visual art for central London hospitals. There is already some hostility to contemporary visual art among the British public and the central London hospitals are very well known, which makes for a good story. It is hard to demonstrate direct benefits to patients/service users of this type of spending, and the projects tend to be relatively expensive.

Therefore, focus your press releases on projects where it is easier to demonstrate the benefits: participatory music or drama projects, anything with children or the elderly, community projects.

- viii) Be aware that when there's a negative arts in health story in the press, the media are likely to call other hospital arts programmes to collect information to support the story. If someone else's project or programme is being criticised, even if yours is uncontroversial, you may be contacted,

which is why it is important to do the groundwork above. Assume all stories have a negative slant until proved otherwise.

- ix) Keep statements to the press bland and they will go to seek a more exciting story. Remember to keep the focus on the patients / service users who are benefiting, the funding which comes from outside the NHS and the research which shows that a pleasant environment and positive distraction while in hospital helps patients to get better more quickly.

If you find you are often asked to do radio or telephone interviews, it may increase your confidence to have some media training; your Trust communications department may be able to help with this. There are tried and tested methods of sounding better in interviews, and correct preparation is very important, e.g. what is the main point you are trying to communicate? What is the interviewer likely to ask you? Who is the audience?

Finally, don't panic! Journalists are just trying to do their jobs and generally don't want to print material which may need to be retracted later for factual inaccuracies. Your communications department is there to help you, and even at times when much coverage of the health service is negative, if you do the groundwork, it is possible to obtain positive coverage for arts projects.

5. Lines to take / Question & Answer (Q&A)

These questions and answers are a starting point for further discussion, to encourage debate about some of the issues relating to arts in hospitals. The questions are deliberately somewhat negative; as arts and health are both politicised topics, it's not unusual to find discussions taking a negative slant and it can be useful to consider how to combat this in advance. The answers are not intended to be used verbatim and any material should be customised to the specific situation.

Research findings, surveys, statistics and comments relating to particular arts projects and initiatives can be used to back up the arguments. Unfortunately, there isn't a great deal of generic campaigning and advocacy information available to arts and health at the moment, however, hopefully these resources will develop further in the future.

i. Why is so much NHS money being spent on arts projects?

Short answer:

Very little NHS money is spent on arts projects. Instead, the money is raised from grants and donations from business, charities and the public. Even if this were not the case, the figure of £9 million spent on the arts in the NHS recently quoted in the media is a tiny amount compared with the overall NHS budget, which is projected to reach £90 billion by 2008; in fact it's less than a 1/10,000 of one percent.

Longer answer:

Very little NHS money is spent on arts projects and the figure of £9 million recently quoted in the media is less than 1/10,000 of one percent of the overall NHS budget, which is projected to reach £90 billion by 2008.

Money for arts projects in hospitals comes from a variety of non-NHS sources, including local and national charities, the Arts Council and donations from businesses and individuals. There are also some specific charitable schemes for supporting arts in hospital such as the King's Fund Programme 'Enhancing the Healing Environment'.

In any case, where money has come from NHS sources (a very small percentage of the total); it has been tied to the delivery of healthcare targets. For example, a research project funded by NHS Estates at the Leeds General Infirmary showed that patients recovered more quickly and needed less drugs in enhanced hospital environments which included artwork; the study therefore proved that enhanced hospital environments had the potential to save the NHS money overall.

ii. Couldn't this money be spent on nursing / equipment / drugs instead?

Short answer:

No, it couldn't, because it comes from different sources. Nursing, equipment and drugs are funded by central government through taxpayers' money. Grants made to arts in hospital projects are given by charitable donors who want to support initiatives which improve the experience of being in hospital for patients, staff and visitors. Using external charitable funds, such as Arts Council grants for arts projects in hospitals is a way of drawing extra money into the NHS for the benefit of everyone who uses them.

The benefit to the funder is that they can reach a much broader cross-section of the population than visits galleries and concert halls, therefore more people can experience the artwork or project they have funded.

Longer answer:

No, it couldn't, because it comes from different sources. NHS staff, equipment and drugs are mostly funded by budgets from central government e.g. taxpayers' money. However, these budgets are always overstretched and demand for NHS services is growing strongly as new treatments are discovered and the average age of the population increases.

Some NHS posts such as specialist nurses for cancer are funded by independent charities like Macmillan and expensive items of equipment are often purchased through charitable appeals. Arts in hospital projects are just some of many charitably-funded activities which help make NHS facilities a more pleasant place to be and which humanise hospital treatment.

The NHS has significant charitable funds, donated by the public, often through legacies, which are separate from government budgets. These are used to pay for general enhancements to the hospital, or may be dedicated to a specific purpose or group of patients e.g. the children's ward, cancer services. Many hospitals have Leagues of Friends, who raise money to provide equipment and services at hospitals which the NHS cannot afford – everything from tea bars to hydrotherapy pools.

In addition, the NHS benefits from many thousands of volunteers who give their time freely every week to help patients and staff. The majority of NHS arts programmes started as voluntary initiatives which in some cases have grown to the extent that a paid worker is required to run the programme, due to the level of demand for its services.

There are many charitable funders and business and private donors who are interested in supporting arts initiatives within the NHS, because of the benefit to

patients and also because they can reach a much broader cross-section of the population by this means than visits galleries and concert halls. Therefore, more people can experience the artwork or project they have funded.

iii. NHS staff are overworked; don't these arts initiatives just add to their stress levels?

Short answer:

Arts in hospital projects are valued by NHS staff as a way of bringing an extra dimension to patient care. They are particularly appreciated by staff such as those who work with children, occupational therapists caring for the elderly and cancer nurses, because the arts projects can help support patients' mood and provide a positive distraction from painful and unpleasant hospital treatment.

Longer answer:

Anyone who has received hospital treatment knows that hospitals can be stressful, boring, busy, anxiety-provoking and even frightening places to be. Feelings of being anxious and stressed delay recovery and can even impede treatment, especially for vulnerable groups such as children and elderly people. Siblings of children being treated in hospital often become anxious themselves and their parents have less time for them because of the understandable focus on the sick child.

NHS staff support arts initiatives which help them to deliver a better service to patients. These include everything from providing concerts for child or adult patients who have a long stay in hospital, to purchasing artwork to make waiting and treatment areas more pleasant, to volunteers maintaining a garden so that visitors to hospital have an outside area where they can sit with patients. All these initiatives require time, money and skills to make them happen and keep them running, and this is where arts in hospital programmes can really assist busy NHS staff.

The other benefit to NHS staff of arts in hospital programmes is that the arts project will raise its own funding for activities from sources external to the NHS and will have contacts with outside organisations and individuals such as museums, theatres, galleries and musicians. Staff and their patients can therefore reap the benefits of the provision of visual art and participatory activities without having to invest scarce time in raising money and organizing projects.

iv. What evidence is there that the arts work in health settings or that they even make a difference?

Short answer:

There is a large and increasing amount of evidence that the arts can have a measurable effect on health. The Arts Council recently commissioned a review of the medical literature relating to the influence and effects of the arts on health. The report studied 385 papers published from 1990 to 2004, finding examples of positive effects of the arts on clinical outcomes, mental healthcare, health practitioners, staff morale and job satisfaction. The study, '*Arts in health: a review of the medical literature*' is available on the Arts Council's website www.artscouncil.org.uk.

Longer answer:

There is a large and increasing amount of evidence that the arts can have a measurable, positive effect on health. The Arts Council recently commissioned a review of the medical literature relating to the influence and effects of the arts on health. The report studied 385 papers published from 1990 to 2004, finding examples of positive effects of the arts on clinical outcomes, mental healthcare, health practitioners, staff morale and job satisfaction. The study, '*Arts in health: a review of the medical literature*' is available on the Arts Council's website www.artscouncil.org.uk.

Research shows that, in clinical settings, encouraging patients to engage with the arts can help them to manage pain and the side effects of some treatments, to alleviate stress, anxiety and boredom and to come to terms with what can be major episodes in their lives.

Incorporating the arts into the design of health care facilities has positive benefits for staff, for patients and for their carers. The arts are a part of normal life which should be maintained in hospital just as religious practice and the company of family and friends are customary and can be therapeutic when provided at the right time during a hospital stay. Participatory arts such as live music have a valuable role in providing social interaction between patients and staff, in an environment which can be isolating.

A recent controlled study of the arts programme at Chelsea and Westminster NHS Trust, which reported, among other findings:

- Patients exposed to live music in the waiting room and visual art in the cubicle and anaesthetic room during their preparation for surgery had psychological, physiological and biological changes which were of high clinical significance

- The levels of stress and anxiety were significantly reduced; patients' vital signs were normalised and they required less drugs during the pre-operative stage
- The patients who were exposed to visual art in the anaesthetic room and afterwards recovered during their post-operative period in a ward with visual arts and twice weekly live music, consumed less analgesics and were discharged one day earlier than those patients who were not exposed to the arts
- A programme of live music in the post-natal ward significantly reduced the levels of anxiety and depression of women after giving birth, enhanced patient satisfaction and the quality of service

v. Do medical staff think arts and health is a good idea?

Short answer:

Yes, because arts and health projects are focused on the well-being of patients while they are in hospital and so they add an extra dimension to patient care. Many NHS staff have chosen their career with the aim of helping people and making a difference; it's easy to lose sight of this in a targets culture, but it remains an important motivation for staff working in healthcare. Incorporating the arts improves patient care, not least because members of staff are more imaginative and compassionate when they use their emotional intelligence in addition to their medical and scientific skills.

Longer answer:

Yes, because arts and health projects are focused on the well-being of patients while they are in hospital and so they add an extra dimension to patient care. Many NHS staff have chosen their career because they genuinely wish to help people and make a difference; it's easy to lose sight of this in a targets culture, but it remains an important motivation for staff working in healthcare.

Medical education is increasingly making use the arts through 'Medical Humanities' course offered to doctors and nurses while they are being trained. Incorporating the arts improves patient care, not least because members of staff are more imaginative and compassionate when they use their emotional intelligence in addition to their medical and scientific skills

Medical educators have recognised that in an age where doctors' status is frequently being questioned, patients are doing their own research on the internet and sufferers from chronic illnesses are being expected to be pro-active manage their conditions themselves, good communication is key.

Creative writing has been introduced to improve doctors' communication skills and forum based theatre has been used to help nurses understand patients' point of view, for more effective therapy. Training using the arts has also been found to be effective in teaching medical staff how to deal sensitively with issues surrounding palliative care and terminal illness.

Medicine is an art as well as a science and there are a number of examples of projects where doctors have worked alongside artists to research issues of mutual interest, to the benefit of both types of professional.

vi. Doesn't art belong in galleries, museums and theatres, not hospitals?

Short answer:

Art belongs anywhere it is useful and appreciated. What could be more useful and appreciated than making someone's experience of hospital more pleasant than it would otherwise have been? Hospitals are major public buildings, open to the local community 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The NHS is the largest employer in Britain and NHS Trusts are frequently the major employer in their local area. It makes sense, therefore, that a building which is used by the majority of the local population should be an attractive one. Hospitals have historically always had artwork and amenities such as gardens; it is only in post-war times that this has not been the case.

Longer answer:

Art belongs anywhere it is useful and appreciated. What could be more useful and appreciated than making someone's experience of hospital more pleasant than it would otherwise have been? Hospitals are major public buildings, open to the local community 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It makes sense, therefore, that a building which is used by the majority of the local population should be an attractive one.

Taking the arts to hospital is a way to open them up to much wider and more socially diverse audiences than visit galleries and theatres. In addition, arts projects are a good way for hospitals to make links with local organisations such as schools and colleges. The NHS is the largest employer in Britain and NHS Trusts are frequently the major employer in their local area. Bringing schoolchildren and students into hospital for a positive reason helps allay fears of hospital treatment and also gives them an insight into the NHS as a possible future employer.

Using the arts to enhance healthcare buildings is not a new or even a modern idea. It has been observed since ancient times that attractive surroundings create positive feelings of relaxation and engage healthy interest.

Victorian public buildings, including the hospitals built in that era, demonstrate this, with their attention to details such as decorative stonework and wall finishes, mosaic flooring, paintings, sculptures, gardens and courtyards. To fund the arts in these buildings was a mark of prestige.

If the Victorians could afford to make their buildings beautiful as well as useful, in their much less affluent age, then why can't we, especially now we have so much scientific evidence showing how crucial a well-designed environment is for successful treatment and recovery?

vii. How can you justify spending anything at all on art in hospital, from whatever source, when the NHS is in such financial disarray?

Short answer:

There is no connection between the non-NHS money spent on arts in hospitals and the NHS's financial problems. On the contrary, arts programmes bring in money and resources from outside the NHS to improve buildings, services and morale. Reasons for problems in the health service are complex and we might note that spending in the NHS is currently at record levels, and the increases in funding in the last few years have been many thousands of times larger than any spending on art.

Longer answer:

There is no connection between the non-NHS money spent on arts in hospitals and the NHS's financial problems. On the contrary, arts programmes bring in money and resources from outside the NHS to improve buildings and services. Reasons for problems in the health service are complex and we might note that spending in the NHS is currently at record levels, and the increases in funding in the last few years have been many thousands of times larger than any spending on art.

Shutting down the 100 or so UK arts in hospital programmes would have no discernable effect on cost pressures. The sums involved are small in the context of the NHS and largely funded by external charities and other contributors. Nonetheless these programmes do an enormous amount to improve morale in the NHS trusts in which they are based.

Good health is affected strongly by the mind as well as by the body; people do not recover purely because of the drugs and medical treatment they receive. The condition of the environment patients are treated in is crucial, and this is where the arts contribute.

viii. Who chooses the artwork?

Short answer:

Artwork for NHS buildings is chosen after discussions with the patients and staff that use the particular location where it is to be sited. The donor or charity that paid for the artwork may also have specific requirements. There are also a range of other factors to be considered including practical questions such as infection control, fire retardancy and cleaning requirements, robustness and suitability for a public building used by a wide range of people.

Longer answer:

Artwork for NHS buildings is chosen after discussions with the patients and staff that use the particular location where it is to be sited. For example, it is usual for an artist who has been commissioned to make artwork for a particular area such as a children's ward, outpatients or a cancer treatment area to consult with patients, their families and staff in order to decide on themes, content and location for the proposed artwork. Where practical, an artist may hold workshops to introduce patients and staff to the techniques being used to make the work.

Artwork for NHS buildings is often made by local artists and incorporates themes and materials which are specific to the local area. This is an effective way to make buildings welcoming for the people who use them and to involve local community groups.

There are many constraints on installing artwork into healthcare buildings, including complying with fire and infection control legislation, ensuring that artwork contains no content that could be upsetting for people viewing it and respecting the diversity of backgrounds of people who use the building. Artwork has to be robust enough to remain in good condition over a number of years in a building which is heavily used by many people, easy to clean and possible to re-site if building use changes in the future.

The donors and charities that pay for the artwork may have specific requirements, for example, a business sponsor may prefer a high-profile artwork in a main entrance, while a children's cancer charity may choose to spend money on activities such as music which are directly beneficial to patients in their area of interest.

It is the role of the hospital arts committee or arts co-ordinator to match the right artwork to the right location, funded by the most appropriate source, after consulting all the interested parties, and then to take care of the artwork collection so that staff and patients can continue to enjoy it in the long term.

6. Sources of further information and advice

Arts and health:

- National Network for the Arts and Health, <http://www.nnah.org.uk> (the Network has announced its closure but will be continuing to maintain the website)
- Creative Remedies is the arts and health website for the West Midlands, however much of the site is generally relevant. The site also offers a weekly e-bulletin. <http://www.creative-remedies.org.uk/>
- London Arts and Health Forum, <http://www.lahf.com>
- Arts and Health South West, <http://www.artsandhealthsouthwest.org.uk/>

Press and public relations:

- The Chartered Institute of Public Relations <http://www.ipr.org.uk>. The CIPR offer training in PR and their 'Freshly Squeezed' introductory series of PR training courses in London start at £50+VAT for non-members.
- The Arts Marketing Association offer regular training courses in press relations as well as on many aspects of marketing. There are also useful resources available on their website (members only: a trial six month membership starts at £45+VAT), <http://www.a-m-a.co.uk>.

Recommended book:

The DIY Guide to Public Relations by Moi Ali (ISBN: 1900360535)
Published by Directory of Social Change, 2nd edition 1999

Written specifically for charities and voluntary organisations, this book covers media relations, internal PR, event management, publication, copywriting, photography, exhibitions, videos, advertising and sponsorship and useful section on using PR consultants. An excellent beginners' guide.

Available from the DSC website:
<http://www.dsc.org.uk/acatalog/Communication.html>

Miscellaneous:

- Freedom of Information Act
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2000/20000036.htm>

- Health Service Journal free weekly ebulletin
<http://www.hsj.co.uk/nav?page=hsj.profile.register.form>
- Google news alerts: You can receive a free daily or weekly alert of all arts, health, and arts and health news stories in the UK only by entering the sentence below on the webpage here:
<http://www.google.com/alerts?hl=en>

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