Since the days of Van Gough the benefits of art therapy have long been supported by mental health facilities as a key creative expression outlet for patients. Northpark Private Hospital was recently approached by Dr Louise Ward, Senior Lecturer, Mental Health Nursing at La Trobe University regarding a project that she had started – stARTalking.

Developed in 2013, the stARTalking project involves La Trobe University undergraduate nursing students who are enrolled in mental health nursing and are participating in an art workshop during their clinical placement experience.

Dr Ward explains that the stARTalking model, as it name implies, provides an opportunity to encourage conversation and dialogue between nurse and patient in a mutually relaxed and friendly space.

“The stARTalking model was based on using creative expression as a way of teaching undergraduate nurses complex communication skills in acute mental health settings,” said Dr Ward.

The outcome of the initial project in 2013 was so successful a public exhibition was organised.

“The exhibition provided opportunity for education through conversation in relation to mental health care and undergraduate nursing care – bridging the gap between service users, students, academics and the general public. All working together to reduce stigma and supporting a recovery framework,” explains Dr Ward.

Ilona Ryan, Education Coordinator at Northpark Private Hospital explains that there was a great synergy between the stARTalking project and programs run for patients in Northpark’s East Ward.

“When Dr Ward explained the premise of the program, we knew that this is something that we’d like to be involved in as our patients would respond well to the art project and we would also be assisting in training student nurses” explains Ilona.

The first stARTalking program was run at Northpark in early September with much success.

“Our patients really enjoyed the program and we certainly saw the benefits of a providing a creative outlet as part of their treatment plan.”

“Many of the patients commented how relaxing it was and how the enjoyed being able to express themselves”, explains Ilona.

“It was great to share ideas and talk about our common interests”, a Northpark patient said.

“I have had a tough couple of days and this art class was a good distraction, it reminded me of happier times in my life,” Northpark patient.

Equally the student nurses benefited from the stARTalking program.

“It was a good chance to meet the new patients and get to know them and talk about other things than just why they were here” a La Trobe nursing student said.

“What we all noticed was that there was no hierarchy to the room, we were all equal – on one level with patients which made the conversation easy”, La Trobe nursing student said.

It is estimated that 60 nursing students will be involved in the project along with a number of mental health patients. The art workshops will be led by registered mental health nurse academics. The stARTalking exhibition is planned for February 2015 at La Trobe University to coincide with O-Week and nursing orientation.