

## **Why staff presence is important during music events at institutions**

I have sung and played at health care institutions hundreds of times. One unhappy conclusion I have to make is that staff often disappear when I come. On one tour in northern Finland I visited three wards at a large institution, and no staff participated. Instead all three wards used my visit as an opportunity to hold staff meetings. This was certainly no accident, since they had decided the timing of my visits.

Their thought seems to have been that since I was entertaining their clients, all staff could attend the meeting. And when I asked if anyone could join me, I was told "we know you will be able to manage"—as if that was my worry! So I was left alone with a number of patients with aphasia and other communication difficulties. Yes, we had a meaningful time together, but it could have been so much better!

### **There are a number of reasons why staff participation would have been beneficial:**

- They could have let me know if someone was particularly hard of hearing
- They could have informed me if someone present was especially sensitive to sounds or touch, for example
- They could have told me clients' names so that I could address them in a more personal way
- They could have told me something of the clients' background, so that when we sang a song about a sailor, a farmer, etc. I could connect the song with that client's former occupation, or use other background information to establish better contact with them
- Many times clients cannot themselves produce much sound, are not fully in touch with what goes on around them, and suffer from a weakened sense of identity in anonymous institutional settings. Here it can be a great help if staff sing or play along, livening things up and contributing to a sense of community which can help clients feel truly alive
- If staff take part there is at least a chance that the music we make can "live on" for awhile since staff can talk with clients later on about what we sang, or perhaps sing a bit of one of the songs again
- If staff participate they may even be inspired to hum while they work, to share with clients the musicality and musical urge that is somewhere within us all
- Finally, taking part may give staff ideas about how they might use music, poetry, etc. in their own daily work, and give them insights about the effects music can have on their clients, even those suffering from dementia. (To hear patients with aphasia who haven't spoken a word in years suddenly sing whole verses can be quite an experience.)