

Initiative Proves Laughter Is the Best Medicine

BY RHODA WEISS

Laughter is the best medicine" is more than a catchy phrase. Clinical studies over the last 20 years have demonstrated that humor plays an important role in healing. As a result, hospitals and health care organizations are initiating a number of humor-related programs. These range from "laughter channels"—a special in-house patient television station that features 24-hour programming of family-based comedy shows and entertainment—to visits by clowns and other activities.

But one hospital has made humor part of its everyday offerings. In a groundbreaking effort to use humor for the clinical benefit of its patients, Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital in Whittier, CA, has trained 25 clowns with the mission of putting smiles on the faces of its patients.

The clowns, ranging in age from 11 to 83 years, have become popular with patients, staff, and administrators. "We have discovered that clown therapy works," says hospital President and Chief Executive Officer Daniel F. Adams. "You can't help but smile when you see them."

The idea for the "Caring Clowns" program began with three clowns visiting children at the hospital. Soon the clowns were getting requests from family members to visit their loved ones.

Adams and Chief Operating Officer Jim West saw the clown program as a natural next step in innovative therapies to augment the facility's popular pet therapy program.

"We were getting requests from across the hospital for our clowns, so we realized that more clowns could bring more smiles for our patients," West says.

When it was decided to offer an eight-week, 16-hour clown academy, the response was immediate. "We had 25 sign-ups the first week," says Public Relations Director Wendy Flores. "The classes were so enjoyable that all 25 participants completed the course and became accredited clowns."

Medical experts who believe laughter is good therapy have long asked for clowns to cheer up



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patients. "Laughter helps tune up your immune system," says Lee Berk, MD, assistant medical professor at University of California, Irvine. "The more a person laughs, the more they strengthen their immune system."

Before they are sent in, the clowns have to observe basic guidelines. "In a hospital, you take special care to respect patients' privacy and space," said Paul Hammonds (whose clown name is "Dr. Strawbelly"). "You also forego the very physical clown stuff because it can scare patients."

The clowns must ask permission before entering patient rooms, avoid touching medical devices and monitors, and wash their hands after leaving each room.

Clowns have created their own costumes and taken names such as "Uncle Sammy," "Uh-Oh," "Winken, Blinken, & Nod," "BeaCuz," "Bubbles," and "Pinky." It often takes an hour or more to apply their makeup and don their colorful costumes. They typically spend several hours in the hospital cheering up patients, family members, and staff.

Sharlene "Strawberry" Hammonds decided to become a clown after recovering from paralysis. "I was paralyzed from the waist down and told it was unlikely that I would walk again," she says. "I promised God that if I were given the opportunity to walk I would help others as much as I could."

Sharlene did walk again and decided to give back by being a clown. "I have always loved clowns, so my husband Paul and I joined the clown fraternity," she says.

After a visit from "Strawberry," a 72-year-old patient said, "I can't remember the last time I felt so happy. When you are suffering from an illness, there's not much to smile about. But these clowns are so wonderful that now I don't mind being in the hospital."

New clown Roy "Uncle Sammy" Holgin is dressed like Uncle Sam. "After the death of my wife, I wanted to help others get through similar tough times," he says. "Patients are appreciative

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The doubt cycle will begin again, of course.

to Myth, Story, and Tradition. Poetry touches life experience in a way that strategic plans cannot. This is the part of organizational life in which the spirit of the new system rests and from which the energy for the new endeavor is generated. It is dangerous to ignore it.

Out of the deeper roots of identity flow the challenges that emerge when differences unite. These challenges are always unique to the particular combination of persons involved. The articulation of these challenges leads, in turn, to a testing of the assumptions that undergird them. If trust has been a byproduct of the sense of celebration and coming together, the testing of assumptions will lead to greater clarity of purpose. If trust has not been a byproduct, then the system is rushing into the Rational without a sufficient base in the Myth.

Once staff members move from Myth to Norm to Belief (see the right side of the **Box**), they begin to sense that they have reached firmer ground. Most organizations are experienced in setting direction and articulating strategies that fulfill those directions. The top level of the **Box** is about allocation of resources and the planning of programs and structures to carry out the purpose.

Once the organization has its new structures in place, has finished forming its plans, and has begun implementing them, the doubt cycle will begin again, of course. The question often arises: "Must an organization experience 'Absolute Doubt?'" There is no simple answer. I urge leaders to pay attention to evaluation. If evaluation reveals deeper levels of doubt, leaders should pay attention both to the questions being raised and the people raising them.

Change surrounds us, usually continuing without our permission. However, those who are immersed in change can at least do the following:

- Recognize the level of change occurring. Is it Rational or Non-rational?
- Develop processes that encourage connection at the Myth level.
- Stand still long enough to assess what is happening and don't expect a quick solution.
- Understand that personal attitude to change shapes one's resistance or accommodation to it.
- Take time to build relationships; from them a Myth is being created.

Remember that we can, by our response to change, choose either to create or destroy. If we respond intelligently, we can be part of the creation of the new story.

Radical change is a time of great challenge for organizations. It is a time when leaders should pay attention to the moment in which they find themselves. Leaders should remember that whatever they may need is right in front of them or perhaps in the person seated next to them. As Whyte's poem reminds us: "Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger." □

NOTES

1. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused*, Doubleday, New York City, 1994, p. 241.
2. Whyte, pp. 242-243.
3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Crown, New York City, 1999.
4. David Wagoner, "Lost," quoted in Whyte, p. 259.

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that someone spends a few moments with them...It picks them up and makes them feel better."

Pam Ehlers, who has two clown alter egos ("BeaCuz" and "Uh-Oh"), says, "When patients do not get visitors, it means a lot to them if we can put a smile on their faces. Many people stop and ask us to go see a friend or family member. These are often the patients who need us most, and we can make a difference in just a few minutes. We always leave a balloon and a smile behind."

"This has been a huge plus for Presbyterian Hospital," Flores says. "Our clowns are well known because of extensive press coverage, and we're receiving requests for them from organizations from throughout southern California."

The clowns bring laughter from the Emergency to the Maternity Departments but seem to have an especially poignant effect on patients with life-threatening disease. On a recent visit to the hospital, a nurse flagged down "Uncle Sammy" and asked him to spend a few minutes with an elderly woman who had an inoperable brain tumor. "She has not smiled in months," the nurse told the clown. "She just lies in bed and stares at the walls, never saying a word."

The clown approached the room and slowly walked inside, bowing and asking if he could come in. The woman tilted her head slightly, looked at him silently, and nodded yes. He began talking to her, and, against all odds, she began talking back...and smiling!

"That is the special magic our clown program brings," Adams says. "Our clowns were trained to provide comfort to our patients. And our patients and their families are more comfortable here because of the spirit the clowns bring to our hospital." □

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