

## Therapeutic clowns have a magnetic presence when they're on the unit.



# Lean on Your Fools

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From left to right: Nurse Flutter (Suzette Araujo), Dr. Flap (Helen Donnelly), Puppet's name, Sunbeam (Elaine Lithwick) and Señorita Rosita (Shoshana Helfenbaum).

**Dr. Flap steps out** of the elevator and onto the third floor of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, strumming a blue ukulele, joined by Nurse Flutter who sings along.

"It's them!" giggles a girl as she moves into the hall.

"Ooooh! The CLOWNS!" proclaims a boy, bending forward in his wheelchair to see Dr. Flap's aviator hat and goggles and Nurse Flutter's brightly striped knee socks and white, ruffled cap.

Grinning children clap as the pair leads an impromptu jam session.

The duo is part of the hospital's Therapeutic Clown Program, which helps bring a sense of play and empowerment to its three inpatient units.

"We find ways to get these young people back to being the most 'them' that they are," says Helen Donnelly, Dr. Flap's real-life alter-ego. "My clown partners and I look for each child's whole self — the things that are so beautiful, joyous and natural. We focus on celebrating all the things the kids can do instead of the things they can't."

"The therapeutic clowns have a magnetic presence when they're on the unit," says Shauna Kingsnorth, who runs a program called Evidence to Care and is an associate professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy. "What seems like pure, joyful play is actually a sophisticated process with lofty goals around empowerment and control that you don't see at first glance."

Kingsnorth has explored the benefits of therapeutic clowning by measuring breathing and heart rates, skin temperature and

perspiration coupled with observational data and kids' descriptions of their moods. For comparison, researchers gathered the same types of information when kids watched television.

Interactions with the clowns had more positive effects on the kids' moods than watching TV. It also had a ripple effect on nursing staff.

"A few seconds break can give people a lift when they need it," says Donnelly. "We help celebrate special events and milestones or we might spontaneously sing them a little song. It's all to say: we see you and we're in this together. Lean on your fools."

Gentle jesters aren't just for kids. The comedic antics of the paediatric pranksters have also been adapted for dementia care.

At the Baycrest Apotex Long Term Care Home, Shoshana Helfenbaum makes regular visits as Caring Clown Señorita Rosita, along with Elaine Lithwick, better known to residents as Sunbeam.

As the pair arrives in the unit, the floor is quiet. A couple of women sit silently along the hallway outside their rooms.

Helfenbaum swishes her polka-dotted skirt, greeting the ladies with a few waves of a flamenco fan. They perk up and begin to smile and joke.

"Do you have a husband?" one of the residents playfully asks.

"I've got too many husbands already!" exclaims Señorita Rosita, pulling a few puppets from her handbag.

Helfenbaum says her role as a Caring Clown is heavily based on engaging with people, drawing them into being present in the moment.

"Sometimes it can be something as simple as noticing what makes someone smile and repeating it by playing and making it bigger," says Helfenbaum. "People who are medicalized are grateful to connect in a relational way that doesn't exclusively focus on medical care."

Pia Kontos, Senior Scientist at the University Health Network's Toronto Rehabilitation Institute agrees. She led research that found that clowns working in nursing homes support people to live well with dementia.

"They build on residents' deliberate playfulness and offer moments of fantasy and laughter," says Kontos, who is also an Associate Professor at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and Adjunct Scientist at Baycrest's Rotman Research Institute. "These aren't things we typically associate with people living with dementia. The art of clowning helps us to see and support the humanity of people living with dementia."

Kontos' study also showed clowning reduces neuropsychiatric symptoms like agitation, but she argues it's a mistake to reduce the arts to a mere therapeutic tool.

"Elder clown visits might result in therapeutic effects, but the arts offer so much more than that. Elder clowns enrich lives. They go to wherever the person with dementia is and create the space for spontaneity and creative self-expression."

And as Helfenbaum and Donnelly know, a sense of fun can often be found — even when you might least expect it.

"People are people wherever you find them and ready to receive lightness and joy wherever they are," says Donnelly. ■