When a clown is the best medicine

By Louise Kinross

Lorrine Peruzzo anticipated the daily unpacking and packing of special dressings in her daughter Katie’s pressure sores with dread.

Katie, 12, who was at Holland Bloorview following a hip replacement, “had to be restrained and she screamed the entire time and had a complete meltdown,” Lorrine remembers. “We couldn’t keep doing that.”

Enter Holland Bloorview’s therapeutic clowns, trained professionals who engage children with physical and emotional comedy and music, letting the kids direct the action as a way of empowering them.

The prescription, in Katie’s case, came in the form of Dr. Flap—known for her trademark flight cap—whose body had been playfully wrapped like a mummy, including her ukulele, in masking tape. While nurses attended to Katie’s dressings, her job was to free Dr. Flap from her bindings.

“It was hilarious,” Lorrine recalls. “Katie acted like she didn’t even know she was having the
Lorraine says that the presence of the clowns was equally therapeutic for her. "I don't know if people realize this, but the clowns are not just for the kids. Whenever Katie's in pain my stress level rises too, because I'm powerless to stop the pain. The clowns have the ability to bring that stress level down for me."

Our therapeutic clowns also played a role in supporting Katie during her therapy in the rehab gym. "Her physiotherapist was getting her up and moving but it was very painful. You could see it in her face. She was always tense, always upset."

During one particular exercise Katie needed to stand and rock back and forth on her feet. She refused.

The clowns Dr. Flap and Nurse Polo assisted. "Dr. Flap played her ukulele and Nurse Polo took Katie's hands and started rocking her back and forth, like she was dancing. It totally took her mind off the painful physio exercise. She went from being 'No, no!' to 'I'm dancing with Nurse Polo. This is fun!'"

In 2010, scientists in the Bloorview Research Institute conducted the first study to measure the long-term physiological effect of therapeutic clowns on hospitalized children. They showed that even a child in a vegetative state and those with profound disabilities respond to the red-nosed performers with changes in skin temperature, sweat level and heart and breathing rate.

Jamie Burnett, one of the clowns involved in the research at the time, explained it this way: "When children come in here they lose all power. They lose control of their bodies due to some illness...and they have doctors telling them what to do, and parents telling them what to do. We allow them to come to a space of complete freedom and imagination...and go wherever they would like to go and that, I think, is so essential, not just in terms of being a human being, but in terms of becoming a healthier person. I am always amazed at the courage they show and I am always amazed at the beauty of their spirits..."

Please consider making a donation to our therapeutic clown program which is supported by Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital Foundation.
2 comments:

Lori B. says:
August 25, 2015 at 8:41 AM

How very fortunate we are to have such a wonderful clown team here to make not only the children's lives but the parents lives so much better - great job everyone!

Reply

Amy Hu says:
September 3, 2015 at 10:45 AM

I am always amazed at the incredible range of experiences our therapeutic clowns are able to offer to the kids. From toddlers to teenagers, they are so good at adapting to the emotional needs of each individual client, and offer them a greater sense of balance during their hospital stay.

The tag-team clowning model is simply wonderful, as this creates a palpable bubble of "clown energy" that touches everyone nearby - clients, families, clinicians, volunteers... Totally fantastic asset to the team; they makes Holland Bloorview such a special place for families and staff!

Reply