

For seven years, Nicki Zwerin was a volunteer chaplain and caring clown at St. Vincents Hospitce in Indianapolis.

One of my very first patients, Sara, was very depressed. She felt so worthless and she needed a job. After a couple of days working with her, I noticed her family would come in and ask who had visited. She couldn't remember, probably because of the drugs, so I got her a notebook. I told her "It's your job to make everyone sign in and have them write a joke." Sara loved the idea. It was an ice breaker and a log of everyone who came into the room. She wouldn't let anyone into the room unless they had a joke. It would also jog Sara's memory, so it was wonderful for everyone. It gave her a job, it helped the staff by adding humor, and it gave visitors a focus for conversation. So when the family came for a visit and Sara couldn't remember her visitors, they went straight to the Joke Book.

I would start the Joke Book out with a few one-liners, or I would paste in a cartoon I got from the paper. The nurses thought it was great, so they would "one up" each other.

When Sara died, I thought to myself "What am I going to do with this?" Of course, I'll give it to the family! It was the best gift for the family as it was the final days of that person in a joyous and happy situation. That was Sara's last gift back to her family. It is probably one of the best things that someone put in my head to do. It wasn't my idea -- someone "upstairs" put it in my head.

These are great for long term patients who may not have energy to laugh or smile. They can still carry their smile. Actually it all started with my stepfather who was in a hospice. I would give him a different smile each week. There are several different types you can purchase. He would put them under the covers and pull them out at appropriate moments and put a smile on his face. The staff really appreciated them too. Once everyone in the hospital had seen it, he would come up with another one I gave him. He liked them so much, he was in fact buried with the smile in his pocket.

Why not make your own? Add moustaches, beards, dimples, clown noses, or slice of cheese (smile-cheese). You can use wooden coffee stirs or tongue depressors, and color them with paint or markers or cut outs.

