

Hospital Clown Newsletter

A Publication for Clowns in Community and World Service

Published Quarterly, www.HospitalClown.com, P.O. Box 8957, Emeryville, California 94662 – Vol. 5 No.3



The Clown Docs are clockwise from center: "Professor Dude" Dana Abendschein; "Dr. Tickeles" Jan Abendschein; "Dr. ICU" Curt Patty; "Nurse Sniggles" Diana Patty

CLOWN DOCS

St. Louis Childrens' Hospital

Snuggled into the Child Life Services Department is the Clown Doctors Program supported by a grant from the St. Louis Children's Hospital Foundation. Clown Docs do "Clown Rounds" two days a week and are employees of the Hospital.

Professor Dude comes around the corner tripping over his giant stethoscope. It gets caught in his pant leg "Nurse can you help me out here" he demands of *Nurse Sniggles* who is forever bailing him out of trouble. After knocking and getting permission to enter a patient's room he complains again, "Nurse where is my paperwork?" She answers with tolerable annoyance "Doctor, in your briefcase!" *Professor Dude* looks in his briefcase which is indeed a very large pair of Fruit of the Loom men's briefs held by a strap around his shoulder. "Oh" he comments and proceeds to take out a roll of toilet paper and begins to teepee the teenager's room complaining of all the paperwork he is required to do.

"You're lucky," *Nurse Sniggles* confides to the patient, "The Professor mummified his last patient." The child giggles, "and the Mom too!" *Nurse Sniggles* adds on the side to the parents, and the whole family laughs. Just then the housekeeper peeks into the room and complains seriously "Hey, don't go using all our toilet paper!" With that the nurse almost loses it, but it doesn't bother *Professor Dude*. He just goes about his "teepee" paper work wrapping the parents in a "comfortable relationship."

Professor Dude, Dana Abendschein, an Associate Professor at Washington University School of Medicine, and the Clown Docs also teach a class in the medical school called The Medicine of Laughter. (See page 9) According to U.S. News and World Report, Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis is ranked the fourth top medical school in the United States. St. Louis Children's Hospital is also ranked as one of the nation's best hospitals, and has a beautiful new facility within the Washington Univ. Medical Community.

Having these two prestigious institutions recognize the value of clowning and humor in their programs is quite a mark of approval for therapeutic clowning and the world of health and humor.

(Continued on Page 7)

Clown Docs of St. Louis Children's Hospital

Working Together, Building Trust

Curt "Dr. ICU" Patty remembers one doctor who was usually very stone faced. So when he was about ready to leave a floor he went over to him with one of his stool samples (a little wooden stool in a clear plastic specimen container) and said "Doctor do you know where I can turn in my stool sample?" The doctor just looked at him and gave a little smug smile like "Ya Right" As Dr. ICU walked away the doctor called after him "That's cute, where can I get one of those." So Dr. ICU gave him one of them. (Curt Patty makes them for the group.)

Jane Abendschein who coordinates the Clown Docs program said "The first two weeks we were strangers, and the staff was apprehensive, but soon they were inviting us everywhere. We are very respectful of their space and their patients" An aspect of the Clown Docs Program is the understanding that humor and antics are not to be directed toward healthcare providers thereby maintaining the integrity of the patient-healthcare provider relationship.

Jennifer Blankenship, Child Life Team Leader commented "The Clown Docs have become a part of the hospital culture by encouraging laughter with everyone in the hospital environment which includes patients, families and staff. Providing a bit of laughter in the hospital setting, especially with caregivers, helps to lighten what can be a very serious mood. It helps give caregivers some feelings of mastery over the difficult, life-changing events they witness with the patients. Laughter provides a release for everyone at the hospital."

Working in pairs, the Clown Docs check with the Charge Nurse before entering the rooms to help communicate any infection control concerns and appropriate rooms to visit. On one such occasion the Charge nurse told Nurse Sniggles (Diana Patty) : "Go to every room except Room 52. They are upset with the hospital – just don't go near them." So as the clowns were doing their rounds they passed Room 52 and "this big guy -- 6'6" 250 lbs -- comes out saying . 'Aren't you going to see my kid?' So we went in and did our routine and they all just melted."

" You just feel people's empathy going out to you and you know by the way they're reacting that you're lifting them up. That has a power that's hard to describe. As clowns we are loving and joyful -- and hopefully people pick up on that. Our faces are painted, but what's coming out is what's inside."

-- Dana Abendschein

On another occasion the charge nurse said "You really don't want to go see that little boy, he's autistic." The nurse in the room concurred saying "He really won't know what you are doing, he's autistic." The Clown Docs blew a few bubbles and pretty soon the child was responding and reaching for the bubbles Smiling the boy said something that indicated that he was having fun. The nurse was shocked "He hasn't said anything for the four days he had been here." Each time the child came back to the hospital, the Clown Docs visited him and he was more and more responsive.



Dr. Tickle (Jane Abendschein) and Dr. ICU (Curt Patty) with their new Clown Docs cart at St. Louis Children's Hospital

Jane Abendschein "Dr. Tickle" reported "During a visit on the inpatient floor a young 4 year old girl was crying and upset. Her mom came out of her room and I asked if we could go in and visit with her daughter. Her mom said "Please my daughter is so upset because she can't go to the Playroom." As soon as we entered the room she immediately stopped crying and was very excited to see us. We began to play with her and blew some bubbles. Dr. ICU caught a "magic" bubble and she was so amazed -- her eyes got so big and she opened her mouth in total disbelief. She tried to catch a "magic" bubble. We left her in a wonderful mood with bubbles that she and grandma could play with."

According to "Dr. Tickle", sometimes it's just the sweetest little excuse for a few more kisses "We visited a family with a small infant. The baby was resting in mom's arms, so I gave her a kiss sticker for the baby. She put the sticker on her forefinger and touched the baby several places on his face saying "here are a lot of kisses for you."

" I love what this work gives my life. It trickles over everything in my life. I feel open and I'm not afraid to be loving."

Curt "Dr. ICU" Patty

The two "real" life couples clown usually with opposite partners, i.e., Jane with Curt and Diana with Dana. However, they substitute for each other when necessary. Both couples have been involved in local community clown ministry for many years in a group called "Fools for Christ". For years they have participated in clown visits to prison inmates.

Jennifer Blankenship Child Life Services Team Leader. commented "I had my hesitations about how the clowns were going to separate their 'Clowning for Christ' personae from their work at St. Louis Children's Hospital. They have pleasantly surprised me in that they have taken on completely different characters and have been successful in separating the two different types of clowning.

I admire their willingness to plunge into new arenas and to stretch and grow as individuals. I think the entire staff of Child Life Services are still adjusting to the new members of the department, but I feel that is a normal part of group dynamics. To help increase understanding of one another, the Clown Docs have participated in staff retreats and child life staff have gone on Clown Rounds with them.”



The Clown Docs clown around Jennifer Blankenship, Child Life Specialist Team Leader.

Child Life and Clown Synergy

Because the structure of the Clown Docs Program places it in The Child Life Services Department it merges the skills of both. Child Life Workers have actually started to work hand in hand with the clowns to develop therapeutic procedures and to address the social and emotional needs of patients, and their families.

Jennifer Blankenship commented on this Synergy (the working together of two things to make something greater than the parts.) “Even though Child Life and Therapeutic Clowning have different mediums for providing ways to help children cope with difficult, life-changing events, we have a lot in common. Both disciplines have a desire to give patients and families a sense of control over the uncontrollable, relieve stress and to encourage the positive attributes of the different patients we work with. And we share the same goal of giving the families positive memories, because the hospital can be such a negative place.

Clowns accomplish these things by providing something for us to laugh about with them, using antics/magic/silly instruments to help the child feel successful or to help them use their imaginations. Child Life professionals accomplish some of the goals mentioned previously, by providing medical play and practicing coping mechanisms to help the patients feel successful in how they prepare themselves for medical events. Child Life also provides group activities, arts and crafts, special events and familiar childhood activities to help give the child a break from the medical routine

and to reduce stress they may feel. [Clown Docs now participate each month in the activities room] Child Life along with Clowns provide that consistent non-medical person that patients/families can relate to on different levels.

“I think that as both sides understand the similarities and differences of the two disciplines, we can create a great synergy by working together. In the long run it is not only the patients that will benefit but we as professionals will become a part of something that can really make a difference.

“I cannot say enough that the Clown Docs I work with have impressed me and have given me a new appreciation for the work they do as clowns. I am very happy to say that they have exceeded my expectations in many ways. They are doing some incredible work with the patients, families and hospital staff. Their work also reaches out to Washington University medical students which will have an impact on future physicians, teaching them about bedside manner, positive ways to incorporate humor into their work and how to positively relate to patients and families.

Child Life Mission

As professionals in Child Life Services, we strive to use various forms of play in a nurturing and supportive environment to decrease stress and anxiety for children, youth and families during healthcare experiences.

Clown Docs Overview

Therapeutic Hospital Clowning is the use of clowning skills and antics to foster an environment where the benefits of humor are used to meet the social and emotional needs of patients, families and the healthcare providers who care for them.

Benefits of Laughter

- Elevates heart rate
- Increases oxygenation of blood
- Lowers stress hormones
- Massages muscles and vital organs
- Decreases pain
- Produces feelings of well being

Benefits to Patients

- Encourages expression
- Provides a sense of control and mastery
- Fosters continuing growth and development
- Enhances positive self image
- Increases feelings of competency and independence

Benefits to Healthcare Providers

- Shared laughter with patients and families
- Sense of mastery over difficult situations
- Fosters a positive and hopeful attitude
- Enhances patient’s receptiveness to learning

Clown Doc Goals

- Develop a rapport with patients
- Maintain a respectful relationship with all healthcare providers
- Provide “Humor Therapy” for hospital staff
- Create a close working relationship with Child Life staff and uphold Child Life philosophies



Medicine of Laughter Class

Dana Abendschein, Ph.D. a.k.a. *Professor Dude* is in his "other" life, an Associate Professor of Medicine and Cell Biology and Physiology at Washington University School of Medicine, where he has been on the faculty since 1983. A popular professor, he was voted Professor of the Year by the Class of 1999. He is principal investigator for a number of cardiovascular studies involving arterial responses to injury, and he holds the patent for a new method of attenuating arterial stenosis after angioplasty. Whew! No wonder the clown in him rose to the occasion and went to the Dean of Undergraduate Medical Education and asked for a Laughter Class for the Medical School. The Dean was so enthused that she swung open the door. Now a class is part of the curriculum as a Selective Course for First Year Students.

Learning Objectives of the Medicine of Laughter Selective:

- 1) To understand the benefits of laughter on the physiology and psychology of patients based on reading and discussion of published research;
- 2) To discuss the benefits of laughter and humor therapy on physician/patient interactions, compliance with therapy, and patient wellness; and,
- 3) To experience first-hand the affect of humor on patients, family, and hospital staff by observing the St Louis Children's Hospital Clown Docs during a regular rounding session.

The first session was held this past summer. This Fall it will be offered in the first and second semester of the First Year of the Medical School Program at Washington University.

Dana writes: " We are not so much interested in making them clowns, but to show them what effect humor has in this environment, clowning being one option.

"This past summer we had 20 students enrolled in the course and six of these went on to actually put on makeup and round with us. The six in what we called a "Super Selective" (See four of them in the photo to the right) spent an additional six hours learning how to put on makeup, develop clown doctor characters and clowning skills."

Following are comments from the students that were in the Medicine of Laughter Selective this past summer:

"I thought the rounds were awesome and really brought home the impact humor and attention have on the children, family and staff in the hospital. I found it funny that the people that were least receptive to the clowns were the physicians themselves."

"The BEST selective I took all year! I don't think I could have fallen asleep even if I tried. I will remember the benefits of mirth as I interact with my patients."

"I liked the chance I got to explore possibilities to improve my relationships with my future co-workers and clients."

"A selective like this is useful in reminding us that we don't have to be all business, it's OK and desirable to relate to our patients on a personal level, and humor is a great way to do that."

"The parents enjoyed the humorous distraction from reality just as much or more than the kids."

"It addressed an important area of patient care that can easily be ignored."

The Super Selective



"Four of the six Clown Doc "Interns" at the end of their first solo makeup session. From left Anthony Fotenos "Doc Doc", Suzanne Albrecht "Dr. Hick Up" Arianne Chavez "Dr. Bulls Eye" and Li Ern Chen " Dr. H. Pocus" All second year medical students at Washington University School of Medicine. Several will continue after class to go on rounds one Saturday a month

Clown Doc-in-Training WUSM, Class of 2003

by Dr. H. Pocus, a.k.a. Li Ern Chen

As medical students, we spend our days learning enormous amounts of science. So you can imagine what a novel experience it is to step into another pair of shoes, interacting with patients in an entirely different role – as a purveyor of mirth. Therein lies the appeal of The Medicine of Laughter class.

Rounding with the Clown Docs, it was obvious that children and their families need more than science to heal, and we jumped at the opportunity to train to be Clown Docs. We were thrilled to make up our faces, put our costumes together, and develop our clown characters. It was just as exciting to see classmates transform into their radically different clown personalities in a matter of hours. As much fun as it was watching my colleagues learn to juggle and spin plates, it was rounding as part of the Clown Doc team that was the highlight of the class.

As I bring a child from fearful withdrawal to smiles and laughter, I am reminded that it is indeed a privilege to be able to contribute to the care of sick children in yet another way.