

Project for Hospital Clowns, Skejby Hospital, Aarhus, Denmark

Clowning and Humor as Methods of Communication and Care

Project: To investigate whether difficult, painful and minor treatments/procedures are eased by humour and clowning. Can clowning relieve suffering; reduce physical pain; reduce feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

The project will be conducted on Ward A3 of Skejby Hospital coordinated by Nina Gladkova, Nurse and Birgit Bang Mogensen, clown.

The uniqueness of this Hospital Clown Program is that it was requested by the hospital. The hospital staff -- Dr. Bent W. Nielsen and Nurse Nina Gladkova were instrumental in supporting the clown project and setting up the first rounds. They asked the clown to make rounds with them to relieve the child's stress. Gunil actually takes part in blood tests, daily reports and situations where children are insecure. With most clowns in the USA when a procedure is going to be done the clown is asked to leave. Or the policies strictly state that the clown leave the room when procedures are being done.

According to Nurse Nina Gladkova, "Even though we do our best to avoid it, children must undergo traumatic experiences and procedures that can cause pain."

"We could spend hours explaining why we need to take a blood test, but that doesn't always help - sometimes we simply fail to reach the child. It can end with four caregivers restraining a single, screaming child. This is where the clown comes in, with their special form of compassion.

"Clowns amplify emotions - legalize them. They break through the authority barrier. The clown doesn't question the treatment itself - the clown just makes it easier for the child to accept it."

Healthy Laughter

A3 is not the first children's ward in the country to hire a clown, but Nina Gladkova and her colleagues want more than just a few hours informal entertainment. The clown doesn't only come as a distraction. She comes as a active and conscious part of the treatment process.

"It is a fact that the immune system is strengthened when we laugh. Laughter releases endorphins that can ease pain, lower blood pressure and calm the heart. Moreover it's pretty hard to hang onto a depression in the face healthy laughter. Not that it should be cheap, superficial humour- like a MacDonald's clown handing out balloons. They're eye-catching and colorful, but there's no soul behind them, and no deeper gift in the comedy. Good comedy is a way into peoples' hearts, into the feelings behind the mask. It creates a connection between people. Laughing together opens our hearts to a shared warmth and compassion, and gives us a place to build from and a tool to help in many difficult situations", according to Nina Gladkova.

Find Your Inner Clown

For the nurses it's essential that a child learns to cope with being admitted to hospital - that they maintain a sense of control over their own life whilst on the ward - a process in which humour can be an ideal tool.

"The best thing a clown can do is inspire us to find our own inner clown, or simply show us a shortcut to the humour of life. There are so many strange and comical situations in our daily life, situations that become genuinely funny with a little twist. Like a doctor telling a funny story, or a dad tripping over his own feet - just to try something new".

Lifting the Ward Atmosphere

Nina adds "The clowns' presence has lifted the atmosphere on the ward. Both doctors and nurses have begun to 'dare' a little more, even when the clown has gone home. Like the ward sister [nurse], who recently found herself doing a crazy walk down the corridor, just because she was having fun with a little girl who was walking with her. Or the ward doctor stuffing two huge cotton swabs in his ears before entering a room to perform a potentially painful examination because, as he explained to the little boy, "I've heard you can scream really loud, and I'm sure you're going to do it again in just a minute". The senior consultant is still respected, but now he has begun to parody himself, having fun with kids and telling jokes to the staff.

The happy atmosphere also affects the families of children on the ward. As Nina Gladkova explains: "Recently there was a large Turkish family who were crying with laughter because the clown pulled them into the playroom and had them singing children songs."

Another time a father looked deeply moved when the clown hosted a huge party with music and song: "His own child had been drifting between life and death in the intensive care unit for weeks, and he was obviously worried. What will happen to my son? Will he ever play again? A little later he met the clown out in the corridor. He had tears in his eyes, and they smiled to each other. She knew he was upset - and that it was okay for him to show it. She didn't stop clowning just because he was sad."



Cartoon by Karina Eskildsen in *Journal of the Danish Medical Society*

Hospitalsklovn Danish Hospital Clowns



Birgit Bang Mogensen aka *Gunil the Clown* has studied clowning at LaCrosse Clown Camp, Dell'Arte in Blue Lake CA, and has been involved with children's theater troupes and has worked as a Pedagogue [social worker] in Childcare Centre on the Island Samsøe. Today she heads up the Project at Skejby Hospital.

Gunil plays the ukulele - little joyful tunes and childhood songs that often staff and parents can sing along. She waits for the doctors to arrive on the ward and then accompanies them on their rounds. Sometimes she sings, sometimes she distracts the child with bubbles or funny magic, but she is always making eye contact and engaging the child. It seems to be a comfort for the staff treating the child as well as the parents.

It was the doctors who contacted Gunil about working in the hospital. Birgit teaches clowning in Aarhus. Those graduating from her can include Nina Gladkova, RN and Bent Eikard, MD.

Currently Gunil is working at the children's A3 ward at Skejby hospital exclusively with children with heart diseases, blood diseases or arthritis. Some have a crippling disease requiring lifelong treatment.

Because of the serious population of the ward the fatality rate is high, a heavy atmosphere develops amongst the staff and families on the ward, but now with the clowns there are happy days too and laughter in the corridors.

A Letter from A Grateful Parent - Autumn 2001

It is now time for me to write to you. For although our son is no longer a patient you have had such a big effect on all our lives. I am the mother of two boys Daniel(12) and Kasper(9). Kasper was born with a heart defect. There have been many complications so he has been hospitalized many times.

The first time we met you was in the autumn of 2000 when Kasper was admitted for his third operation. It was hard for us to take -- not only were we in a ward filled with very ill children, we now had to deal with a clown! Were we expected to laugh? I remember thinking at the time, this is definitely not something to laugh at.

But this is what happened;

Gunil was with the doctor on his ward rounds. A very different experience than we were used to. We thought at first it was a little strange because now we also had time to talk to the doctor.

Gunil spoke first with Kasper then when she could sense that we were finished she turned to Tommy (Kasper's father) and said, "Haven't you forgotten to polish your shoes today" Daniel began to laugh in fact he laughed till he cried. We all did, it was such a relief. It was here that we first found out that we were "allowed" to laugh in such a serious place. It was wonderful. Kasper began to relax. He had something else to think about for a little while. Sometimes the simplest words can mean so much.

Another time when Kasper was due for a check-up it was luckily a Wednesday as Kasper said "it has to be a Wednesday because Gunil will be there and she is my friend. And that's what she is, a friend.

In the spring of 2001 we were on the ward for four months. It was a very hard time for us, but mostly for Kasper. He underwent a very big operation which was hard to recover from. He was in and out of narcosis and eventually sent up to intensive care where he lay for four weeks.

It was extremely difficult to be there surrounded by all those machines he was attached to. He was in a lot of pain and very aware of his body and what happened around him. Then one Wednesday morning, he was about to have a methadone injection, and Gunil dropped by. It was a lovely surprise, he forgot completely about the pain and began to laugh and smile as much as he could with a huge scar down the middle of his chest from the operation. We all forgot, for a moment or two, where we were.

When Gunil had gone Kasper said "That was really cool that she visited me. I thought she had forgotten about me."

"A real friend never forgets" we told him.

Continued on next page



[Gratitude Letter Continued from previous page]

The Burger party we had on the ward where Gunil agreed to be guest of honor meant a great deal to us. Both Daniel and Kasper still talk about it regularly.

The reason for the party was to encourage Kasper who was still very ill. It had the effect that he nearly got out of bed when Gunil came to see him.

I have thought a lot about what it means to have a clown on a hospital ward .It can mean a huge amount if the clown is not just a kids' entertainer, but can involve the whole family. And Gunil is very good at this.

When I have had the time I have observed the other kids and parents on the ward. I could see that if they ,like us, allowed themselves to laugh the whole thing was easier to deal with. We all had more energy to deal with the more serious things and were more relaxed with the brothers and sisters who can very often suffer in the shadow of their sick sibling.

I hope all children's wards get a 'Gunil' We could all use one. My experience is that all she does cannot be expressed in words.



Pictured above is Ewan MacKinnon. What a wonderful clown he is, full of fun and love. He simply wears a red nose. When I added a little white eyebrow, one of his little "patients" demanded, "Why is your face so dirty-take off that stuff," So the painted eyebrows came off!

One of the things I saw him do was like a running gag. He mimes getting on a motor cycle (noise and all) and then goes speeding out of the room and down the hall. Seconds later he is seen (noise included) going past the door and another second and he is going past the other way. Sometimes he is seen giving rides on his imaginary cycle Kids just loved it and so did Shobi!



Laugh, My Child, Laugh

Kim Hundevadt writes in the Danish Newspaper Jyllands-Posten

"Six year-old Helle is tough, she just sticks out her arm when, for the 117th time, she has to have a blood test. Too brave to need an anaesthetic plaster.

"But then her illness becomes worse. Helle is scared and withdrawn - it's hard work living up to her strong girl image. Which is when the clown enters the ward.- in a polka dot dress.

"The nurse asks Helle if she's ready for the prick of the needle. The scared clown runs around the ward, full of bad excuses. Helle starts laughing; relieved that somebody finally dares show how hard it actually is being ill, submitting your body to the prodding and poking of endless examinations.

"Four year-old Sarah is a heart patient - blind and desperately scared of the doctors and nurses who believe they can help her. Sarah has bad memories. In a Somali village she was burned all over her body by a medicine man, who thought he could give her back her vision.

"She pulls back, until the clown brings out the ukulele and sings her favorite song "Little finger, little finger where are you?" one finger at a time. Cautiously Sarah reaches out and touches the clown's nose - and finally a big smile appears. Slowly she begins to dance.



Above Ewan has lunch with hospitalized children, siblings, parents, and staff They eat all together in a common room once a week. Parents often eat in this room (food is brought up from the hospital kitchen) where they can share feelings, ideas, and bond. Parents told me this was one of the best things the hospital has done for them. It gives them a sense of family and offers comfort that "only another parent who has a child in the hospital can give."

Besides the comfort of a family lunch, the grounds of the hospital are open to the wards, so in good weather the children can go outside in the sun. The hospital is not built up as most are here in the states, but rather spreads out over many acres. The staff get around on motorized carts or these great scooters (you know Shobi loved to ride on them!)