

The Press on Warp Drive

from Shobi Dobi

NO MORE CLOWNING AROUND – IT’S TOO SCARY

Decorating children’s wards with images of clowns could frighten young patients, new research has found.

More than 250 children aged between four and 16 took part in the *Space to Care* study by the University of Sheffield, aimed at improving hospital design for children. All of them disliked the use of clowns in décor, with even the oldest children finding them scary.



DIGITAL ARCHIVE JAPAN

Penny Curtis, a senior lecturer in research at the university, said: ‘As adults we make assumptions about what works for children. We found that clowns are universally disliked by children.

Some found them frightening and unknowable.’

She stressed the importance of consulting with children, who like colourful spaces and references to contemporary

culture, when designing or changing hospital environments.

Marjorie Gillies, a senior nurse for patient services at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Glasgow, said: ‘We found that having clowns and decorations everywhere is too much. We have gone back to plain walls with areas decorated appropriately.’

The authors of the study, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, produced a guide on how to create a more child-friendly environment. This can be downloaded from: www.cscy.group.shef.ac.uk/research/spacetocare.htm

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Above is the article from Nursing Standard in England that though my research seems to be the one the AP and Reuters picked up on and was then transmitted around the world. Varies titles referred to the study and were sound-bites on radio and TV and such shows as Good Morning America and NBC Today show. As far as I know the only newscasters to print comments from protesting clowns was Reuters on Jan. 18, 2008. However, the vessel was already in drive and warping around the world. “Clowns are Scary” being much more news worthy than “Clowns blow a raspberry at researchers over study” which contained clown comments from around the world in protest.

Following is the letter I wrote to Penny Curtis, senior researcher at the University of Sheffield, who is quoted in the article in January of 2007. I have not received a reply to my letter (as of this date Sept 27, 2008) and will not pursue this any further. My intend in the letter was not to criticize the study, but to clarify the perimeters and results of the study. I based the comments in the letter on hours of reading and searching the Internet.

My intention with this article is not to criticize the press but to give you the facts. The next time someone says “and a study at a University in England found that children don’t like clowns,” you’ll have an answer. If a hospital administrator tries to use the study to degrade hospital clowning and clowning in general, be prepared. A full account of the study is in PDF format follows the letter to Dr. Curtis on pages 3 and 4. I have transcribed the Power Point slide presentation.

The study, entitled **Space to Care**, was a facility study. The intent was to determine the preferences of these 200 children regarding hospital space, color and decor.

In the Power Point slide presentation mentioned in the letter, (the only reference to clowns I found on the whole study website), the therapeutic use of the clowns is not considered. None of the Theodora Hospital Clowns who work at the hospital are part of this study in any way. The clown cartoons that the 14-year-old found “scary” were on the walls leading to the “theater” [surgery room]. The other Power Point slide

presentation on the social implications or the child’s perspective of a child’s hospitalization did not mention clowns.

This is not an uncommon occurrence in the media today. It makes me wonder what truth is being reported! (I hope all of you in the USA are aware of the website “www.factcheck.org” from the University of Pennsylvania which checks the facts of political issues.)

Reuters often publishes news about clowns in community service. So what is it about the “scary clown” that the media and the world find so sensational? Now that is a question to consider!

Why so much to do about Fear of Clowns?

A fear of clowns has been stated by the medical profession as Coulrophobia (coulro is Greek for “limb” or maybe it could be “stilt”) so is not exactly a good match for clown phobia except that “coulro” may sound like clown.

All phobias can be serious. When I encounter a coulrophobic adult, I cover my face while walking around them. Next time, I might just add for my own amusement “I don’t see any stilt walkers, ” and leave confused which would be Shobi’s character.

I respect an adult’s right to have this phobia, but when they pass it onto their children, that concerns me.

One website I found said this type of phobia is also a kind of fear of people in disguise. Another said it was a fear of a fixed smile like *the joker*. So I’ve experimented with this. When I get an “almost afraid” look from a child, I put my face in motion. You can almost see the child thinking “Oh, a human being” Tey it and let me know what happens/.

What I am finding most curious as I travel around the world as a clown - children in Mexico, China, Japan, South America are not afraid of me - a clown. In India the children were curious, not afraid.

What is it about the “Western World” that fosters this fear of clowns? And even more interesting I have found that African American, Hispanic American and Asian American children are not usually afraid of me. And poor Caucasian children (like those in shelters) don’t seem to be afraid. Is this just me or do you all find this happening?

Following is the letter sent to Dr. Penny Curtis:

[Hospital Clown Newsletter Letterhead]

September 3, 2008

Dr Penny Curtis
Senior Lecturer in Research
The University of Sheffield School of Nursing and Midwifery
Samuel Fox House, Northern General Hospital
Herries Road Sheffield, England S5 7AU

Re: Space to Care Study

Dear Dr. Curtis:

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to read this letter. I am the Editor of The Hospital Clown Newsletter, an international newsletter for clowns in community and world service. We are not aligned with any political, national, or religious organizations. Our only goal is to network and facilitate the growth of therapeutic humor in hospitals and other crisis situations. Our publication reaches clowns worldwide both through newsletter and our website.

We are writing an article on the Space to Care Study at the University of Sheffield given how much media attention it has received in regard to clowns in hospitals. I have searched the Internet and studied the information given on the University website on the **Space to Care** Study and found only one document that mentions clowns as the part of the study - a Power Point slide presentation - **The Hospital as a Physical Space: Children's Perspectives**. In reading the findings pertaining to clowns, I found the following:

In reading the findings pertaining to clowns, I found only the following:

[Children Disliked:

- Patterns on the curtains 'well, if you're feeling dizzy, like you look at the curtains and like all the colours are mixed up. It makes you feel sick '(9m)
- Clown motifs [cartoons]
'It's weird' (9m) 'they're kind of creepy, the clowns' (11f)
'the clowns are scary on the way to theatre' [Operating room] (14m)
- Out of date / unchanging decorations

[Emphasis added by HCN The numbers refer to the age and gender of the child, i.e., 9m= 9 year old male]

The entire study seems to be focused on the venue and the facility and how it is perceived by hospitalized children. In the sections of the study on the social implications or the child's perspective of a child's hospitalization I found no mention of clowns. Is it true that only three children responded negatively to the clown cartoons as the PowerPoint outline above indicates?

From my research I found an article in the Nursing Standard Journals in England quoted at a power point presentation about clown decor and it was picked up carried by the AP and UP around the whole world.

Below is the contents of the article that I believe the AP and media

picked up from the NURSING STANDARD, January 16 :: vol. 22 no 19 / 2008, which they were kind enough to send to us.

NO MORE CLOWNING AROUND – IT'S TOO SCARY

[See article on previous page was reprinted here - this is total article that was printed in the journal]

You might not be aware of the international exposure the study received. I understand from my hospital clown friends in England that this "headline" was squelched by more sensational news of a British Airline crash a week after the nursing journal's article.

However, in the rest of the world headlines the headlines grew more absurd.

"It's official: Children hate clowns. A recent study that quizzed 250 children in a pediatric hospital ward found that all 250 of them were afraid of the various clown imagery that decorated the wing. As though terminal illness wasn't enough. Penny Curtis, a professor who worked on the study, is quoted as saying "We found that clowns are universally disliked by children. Some found them quite frightening and unknowable."

Unfortunately, the Press picked up on the negative comments and it became "don't invite a clown to you next birthday party . . . a study in England proved that children dislike clowns . . ." In my hometown of Berkeley California, USA I was driving to the YMCA when a traffic reporter stated, "and folks a study has been done in England proving that children are afraid of clowns, so think twice about inviting a clown to your kids next birthday party." Even a worse distortion of the facts became a headline - "Hospitalized Children Are Afraid of Clowns."

It is not my intention to point a finger at you as having caused this misinterpretation of the press. I want my article to present the facts of the study. The purpose of this article is to give some background to hospital clowns internationally who might be confronted by hospital administrators and fund raisers using this study to dismiss or degrade the work of the hospital clown.

I hope you will respond so I can fairly clarify your point of view. Is there a study that backs up the statement of a ". . . universal dislike of clowns" or does that reflect a distortion of the study or a misquote that the press pick up and exaggerated?

I thank you for the work you are doing to make our children more comfortable in the hospital. We hospital clowns aim to get to the child's level to interact and help them cope and give them a giggle along the way. We often see through the child eyes, what they see.

Please visit my website at www.hospitalclown.com. You can find my resume by clicking under my photo. There are many back issues of the newsletter also available under "previous issues" and "workshop" handouts.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Shobhana Schwebke
Editor of The Hospital Clown Newsletter.
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[We never received a reply] The Theodora Trust Therapeutic Clowns who do work at the hospital in the study were never mentioned. They did their own study, which was never pick up by any of the news media!

In spite of what the news media does, clowns will always prevail, as we are a integral part of humanity!

The Space to Care Study

The Following pages were taken from a slide presentation given on the "Study". It is the only document that mentions clowns. And it is on the Physical Space, not the Therapeutic Use of the facility. The other slide presentation on the social implications or the child's perspective of a child's hospitalization do not mention clowns.

The clown cartoons that the 14 year old who found scary were on the walls leading to the "theater" [British for surgery room.] See Page ___ comments by 3 children who found the decorations of clown weird, scary and babyish.

~ HCN Shobi

The Hospital as a Physical Space: Children's Perspectives

Prof. Allison James

Dr Penny Curtis

Dr Jo Birch

Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth,
University of Sheffield, England

What do children like/dislike about hospital space in terms of colour, size, décor etc?

What meanings do they attribute to that space?

What are the implications of their perspectives for the current policy agenda?

NFS Forward (2003)

'Child-friendly hospitals recognise that children are not the same as adults'

'Means designing hospital services from the child's point of view'

'Care that is delivered is genuinely child-centred.'

"...core principles of providing a friendly environment for any child or young person who accesses healthcare facilities, for whatever reason". NHS Estates 2004 p6

Many Facilities Have Been:

"designed with little acknowledgement of the differing needs of small children, older children, adolescents, parents and carers"

[The 'Emerging Findings' from the Children's National Service Framework (NSF) (Department of Health 2003 para 2.19)]

Questions

How is this agenda being translated into the design of hospital space?

Does it meet children's needs?

Do different children need different things?

How is childhood conceptualised in this process?
How are children positioned?

Color is Important

Colour - 'bright' 'cheerful' colours, multi-colours are liked by all children, including older children

'change the colour...have blue, red, orange, yellow' (7f)

'it looks colourful and welcoming' (11f)

'they're nice, bright welcoming colours (13m)

'it's colourful and takes your mind off things' (14m)

So.... 'it's more like for children' (13f)

Green, Pink or White?

Green

'green looks dirty' (15f)

'green is horrible and mucky' (14f)

'green like baby diarrhoea' (14f)

White

'a bit boring' (7f) 'it's a really dull colour' (9f)

'bathrooms are nice when they are white' (13m)

Pink

'it's pink, a girl's room (6f)

'it's pink, all pink and even those shoes are pink!' (7m)

Children dislike plain, dull, dark spaces

'It's really dull' (14m)

'walls are just plain, they should be different colours' (7m)

'it's a bit plain and white and scary for little children' (12f)

Light - Bright?

Lightness/ brightness important

BUT for in-patients also control over lighting is important -

'they keep the lights on all day, nights and day because people come in and the light shines in to the bed..because I can't get to sleep' (9f)

DECORATIONS

Children dislike dull, plain, dark spaces:

'walls are just plain, they should be different colours' (7m)

'it's decorated so it doesn't look boring' (14f)

'there's no decoration. They are just plain white walls' (13m)

Children like to see decorations:

'I like the pictures...they are out of the jungle (7f)

'It's got nice pictures, makes you feel happier' (10f)

'it's got a bit more life in it, it's got painting on the window' (9Am)

'[another hospital] was a bit drab. There was nothing on the walls, they were plain. It was a bit drab. It's a lot better here' (14m)

Liked:

Simpsons, Sponge Bob Square Pants, Monsters Inc.
Local football teams, local photographs
Themed spaces
Children's own drawings
Mobiles and hanging decorations
Painted ceilings and floors

Disliked: [Border and emphasis by HCN Editor]

- Patterns on the curtains 'well, if you're feeling dizzy, like you look at the curtains and like all the colours are mixed up. It makes you feel sick' (9m)
- Clown motifs [cartoons]
'It's weird' (9m) 'they're kind of creepy, the clowns' (11f)
'the clowns are scary on the way to theatre' [Operating room] (14m)
- Out of date / unchanging decorations

Decorations - different children, different views

- Key issue is 'age-related' characteristics of many decorations
'It's got a picture of Sponge Bob! (9f)
'I like the way it's set out with those dangly pictures at the top' (9m)
Compared with...
'Sponge Bob and Square Pants. I hate them. They are good for children though' (14m)
'I don't like those things hanging from the ceiling. They are just drawn and they don't brighten up the room..it's a bit kiddie' (13m)

'All the decoration and colours are good for younger kids so it feels like nursery instead of a scary hospital' (16f)

Tidiness and cleanliness

"It should be stored...I understand some stuff has to be out"
(13f)
'the bins are overflowing' (16f)
'there's the mess...don't like it' (6f)
[the bathroom] "looks plain...untidy and the wall is dirty"
(6f)
'they don't even look hygienic' (15f)
'it looks a tip in the toilets' (11m)

Sense and quality of space?

Bigger, less crowded spaces preferred
'it looks cramped' (13m)

But

Cosy & comfort also important

'really soft... like the cover and pillow..it's lovely and cuddly'
(6m)

'looks comfortable.. Chairs look really comfortable' (11f)

Outside Spaces

Few comments about outdoor spaces across the whole sample
Only one hospital had regular outdoor access but:
'there's not many things to do..all there is, is baby toys to play on' (9f)
Fresh air mentioned by a few younger children
Older children occasionally wish more freedom to go out

Wayfinding and Lay out

- Few comments about design of hospital space, way-finding and restricted access
- Bed space is key space
- Children's experiences as children is of spatial restrictions

Concepts of childhood & children's subject positions

- Children as young as 7 or 8 see physical space as largely 'encoded' for babies & toddlers
- Calls for age segregation:
'a place like up to seven years old..and then there could be like a big area for older' (11f)
'build another ward for babies to be in' (11f)
'separate babies from older people, like separate babies from toddlers, toddlers from teens' (12f)
'I think we could have been separate from them [the babies] so they didn't keep us awake (13m)
'split the little kids away from older kids (14f)
'babies are annoying to my age...and we probably just annoy their parents anyway. Just being a teenager, you just annoy everyone, don't you' (15m)

Child Friendly Hospitals

- Adults' ideas of what constitutes child friendly design?
- Overwhelmingly, 'the child' is the infant child
- Middle childhood acknowledged less well
- Adolescents' different needs recognised but not necessarily met

Children's recommendations on the hospital as a physical space

- Hospitals need to be clean, tidy, bright, colourful, spacious, welcoming, comfy and quiet.

It was a bit bigger. Here it's tidier and cleaner. I prefer this one. It's quieter here.' (11f)

I like the curtains and they are not boring pictures. It brightens up the room. It's not jam packed.' (12m)

- Hospitals need take account of babies' and older children's different needs.
'from one to five in one place, then from five to ten I would say in one and then from fifteen and sixteen in another... move them around and that, so the young uns can shout and scream in their bit and the other ones can be quieter and the other uns can just go on their computer' (12m)