

The Hospital Clowns



“Health is based on happiness - from hugging and clowning around to finding joy in family and friends, satisfaction in work, and ecstasy in nature and the arts.”

Patch Adams

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Introduction

When I was 4 years old, I spent two weeks in a hospital for a heart operation. Two weeks which, for the child I was, seemed to be months; months of boredom and anguish. There was no fun in the hospital, no clowns and not many visitors ... only scary nurses checking all the little tubes coming out of my body, and the eternal threat of the needle.

Many years later, I heard of Theodora's clown doctors, and I knew that working in a hospital as a clown was going to be my next dream.

But what are clown doctors exactly? Is it really appropriate for every patient? How does the hospital staff react? Is any clown able to be a clown in a hospital? Why bring laughter into a hospital, which is meant to be a serious place, dealing with pain and death?

All these questions are often asked. There has been a polemic debate between clowns and doctors since the beginning. It has not always been easy to defend the idea that happiness is closely linked with health; that humour could definitely help to cope with pain, even with death. Thanks to people like Patch Adams, and even Hippocrates, life in a hospital is happier and more fun than before, and for a 4-year-old child stuck in her bed time goes a lot quicker!

History

Hippocrates and the beginning of Medicine

I have read many times that “clowns have worked in hospitals since the time of Hippocrates”. I wish I could confirm it myself but I couldn't find anything like that through my research on the history of medicine. Yet I discovered many other interesting aspects of the healing process along the centuries, and the changes in how physicians looked at their patients.

Born in 460 BC in Greece, Hippocrates is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine. According to him, in order to heal, you had to study the entire person in his environment, noting the effect of food, occupation, and even climate in causing disease.

A few centuries later, Asclepiades of Bithynia insisted that disease should be treated in a safe, quick and most of all agreeable way. To cure, he used typical Greek remedies like massage, occasional tonics, fresh air and corrective diet. He is the one as well who started to pay attention to mental disease. He was clearly distinguishing

hallucinations from delusions. He released the insane from confinement in dark cellars and prescribed “a regiment of occupational therapy, soothing music, soporifics (especially wine) and exercises to improve the attention and memory.”¹

During the Middle Ages, Salerno opened the first medical school in Italy. He produced his own literature, the *Salernitan Guide of Health*, written in verse. He wrote:

“Use three physicians still, first Doctor Quiet,
Next Doctor Merry Man, and Doctor Diet.”²

At the same period, the philosopher Syddenham noted that “the arrival of a good clown does more for the health of the village than twenty asses laden with drugs.”³

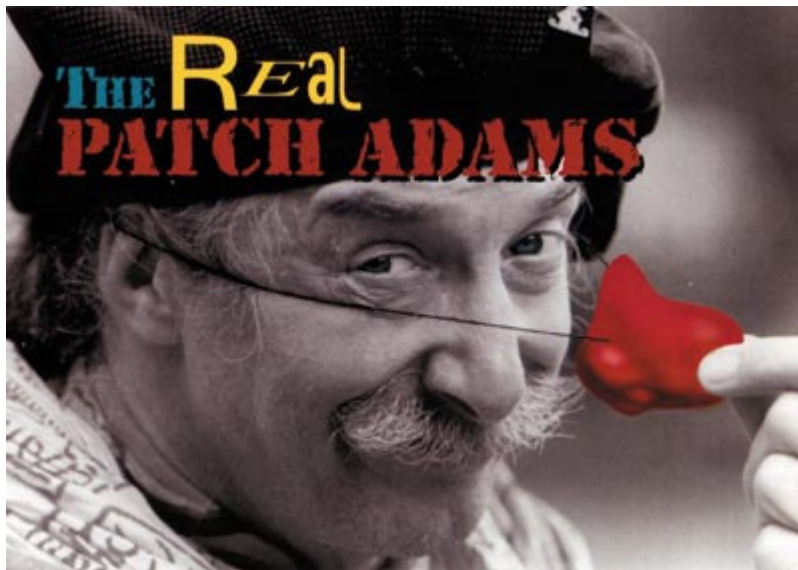
At the beginning of medicine, physicians didn't have much knowledge about the body. They believed in supernatural power, in nature, in magic, but they always considered the patient as an individual, as a body and a mind. Nobody would have thought about healing one without the other. Along the centuries, physicians learnt more and more about the body, how it worked, what was inside; and the more they knew, the more they forgot that the patient was a human being with pains, emotions, an environment and a story. I guess it's probably true that there were already clowns helping healing in the time of Hippocrates and the physicians were helping people to feel better with a variety of remedies for the body as well as for the mind. From the 18th century, when most of the discoveries in the world of medicine were made, physicians started viewing their patient as an exciting composition of organs, tissues and muscles; and the doctor-patient relationship got worse and worse. So much that in 1971, Patch Adams decided that he needed to do something to change that relationship...

Patch Adams

¹ In *Encyclopaedia Britannica* / History of Medicine, p.778

² In *Encyclopaedia Britannica* / History of Medicine, p.780

³ in Send in the clowns, by Patty Wooten, www.jesthealth.com



Patch Adams was an army officer's son, always moving from one place to another in Germany. He hardly got to know his father until he came back from World War II. They spent one week together and his father talked for the first time about his feelings during the war. One week later, as they just finally became friends, his father died from a heart attack. That event changed Adams' life. He and his family moved back to America, his mother's native country, and he started studying biology, spent his time fighting the system and slowly became depressed. After a failed suicide attempt, he ran back home to talk with his mother and decided by himself to go to an asylum.

He soon realised that nobody in the asylum was actually insane or crazy, but that they were "souls in despair". These people had no love and no happiness. He realised that he had forgotten all about emotions and feelings and was spending his life thinking too much, putting walls between himself and others. You need to be open to receive love, and love makes you a stronger person. Realising that, he went out from the hospital and started to be a student of life, of happy life! He wanted to know everything about people, happiness and friendship. He read books, called wrong numbers to see how long people would talk with him, ran the elevators to see how many floors would pass before people start talking to each other and refused to leave a bar before trying to learn everybody's story. He was actually studying science again but with human beings as the subject. He soon applied to a medical school.

From the beginning, Patch Adams was horrified to see how doctors would treat their patients in the hospital and how teachers would talk about the doctor-patient relationship at the medical school. For example, the doctors were meant to

know all the answers, they were seen as superheroes and therefore there was no room for mistakes or humanity; the patient was called by the name of the disease. There was absolutely no friendliness and humour. Patch Adams started spending time with patients by himself, talking, joking, giving massages, and during 6 months in a children's hospital he put a red nose on. The patients, the nurses and half of the students loved him. The other half of the students and the doctors and teachers were considering him as a threat: a hospital is a serious place. Patch Adams made his hospital visits more discreet so that he wouldn't be in trouble to finish his studies. He was working as well in a hippy-style clinic: it was a free clinic open at night and run by volunteers. Again he put a red nose on and realised that it definitely didn't change the respect from the patient. However it would even increase friendliness and friendship and the patients were feeling better when happier. One night, he wrote down the project *Gesundheit*, which was first called "Thinking Positive". The idea was to build "a community where people with poor self-images could go, actively participate in rebuilding their lives and re-establish love of self and of others."⁴ Everything would be free but everybody had to help in a way. He thought about silly projects, too, like building tree houses with the only aim to have fun. His goal was to change the patients into active partners in the process of having a better life. For him, everybody should live their life so fully that they would have no regret if they become seriously ill. He founded the first version of the Gesundheit Institute in 1971. In his institute, laughter, play and having fun are as commonplace as drugs and diagnostic testing are in a traditional hospital.

The Big Apple Circus

The Big Apple Circus was created in 1977 in New York by Michael Christensen. In 1986, he established the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit (CCU) in the Babies and Children's Hospital of New York, which became the first hospital staffed with clown doctors. By 2002 they had opened this program in 15 hospitals in USA. Three of the clowns working in the Big Apple Circus CCU, plus Michael Christensen, also created other organisations like that around the world:

- Caroline Simons founded Le Rire Medecin in Paris, France, in 1991.

⁴ in Gesundheit!, Patch Adams, 1993, Healing Arts Press

- Laura Fernandez founded Die Clown Doktoren organisation in Germany in 1993.
- Yury Olshansky co-founded Soccorso Clown in Italy in 1997.
- Michael Christensen originated the idea of creating the Zdravotní Klaun, in the Czech Republic in 1998.

Other parts of America and Canada followed the Big Apple Circus example to bring clowns into their hospitals too.

Theodora

The Theodora Foundation was established in Switzerland in 1993 by Andre and Jean Poulie in memory of their mother Mrs Theodora Poulie. Today 120 clown doctors visit 35 hospitals in Switzerland and 40 hospitals abroad, including the UK, France, Spain, Turkey, Hong Kong, Italy, South Africa and Belarus.

Australia's Humour Foundation Clown Doctor Programs

The Humour Foundation was founded in 1997 by Peter Spitzer, a medical practitioner and Jean-Paul Bell, a professional performer. They are apparently the only ones in the world who visit regularly both child and adult palliative care facilities. They have special projects like visits to hospitals, orphanages and villages in East Timor (2000), or visits to hospitals and schools in Afghanistan (2002).

The Healing Power of Laughter and Humour



Laughter is synonymous with release. To be able to laugh at yourself or at what happens to you makes you see the sunny side of the dark clouds you've got inside. You feel better and suddenly things are not as drastic.

“It's easy to smile when the world goes round and round
but the man worthwhile is the man who can smile
when his pants are falling down.” *Anonymous*⁵

Laughter is a “wonder drug”. From a medical point of view, it has been proved to make the adrenaline level drop in the body, which has the effect of relaxing the body. It increases as well the immune response which makes the body more resistant to disease. Moreover, it has a positive effect on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems and reduces pain by releasing endorphins, the body's natural painkiller.

From a psychological point of view, laughter releases and combats stress, helps promote a positive look on life and helps people cope with difficult situations by changing how they relate to what's happening to them; it gives them a broader, deeper view of life. Moreover, it creates bonds between people. Laughter gives a feeling of power and control, makes us feel hopeful and light-hearted. It kicks away depression, fear, anger and loneliness.

In the hospital, laughter allows everybody to breath, release emotions, relax, and take distance from dramatic issues. To dispense laughter will directly enhance the

⁵ in Laughter as therapy, p.2, www.jesthealth.com/ch_pulm.html

quality of life and perhaps the will to live! It definitely has a powerful influence in the patient's recovery process.



The Hospital Clowns

Who are they?

Usually the hospital clowns are professional performers in circus, theatre or street shows, trained in mime, acrobatics, juggling, music, clowning and/or singing. They are selected by intensive auditions. They need to have a high level of skills and of sensitivity. Theodora for example asks and tests:

- Psychological fitness
- References
- Availability
- Sensitivity
- Commitment
- A perfect reputation

A hospital clown is not a bold, bumbling and noisy circus clown; on contrary, he must be soft, gentle and empathetic towards the patient. He's not here to perform a show or a routine, but to establish a relationship with the patient, to give him/her a link with the normal life. He becomes a friend.

He won't measure his success by the audience laughter or applause. It has nothing to do with success. A hospital clown doesn't expect anything from the patient, but gives unconditional gentleness, hugs and smiles. He wants to brighten his/her day and the reward can be a smile, a tender thank you or even tears. The main qualities required to be a good clown doctor are good listening skills and empathy.

Successful applicants follow an intensive training program outside the hospital about medical matters and procedures, the hospital environment, the regulations, the psychology of the hospitalised child, hygiene and confidentiality issues. Then they work in a hospital with a supervisor for 12 months before becoming “proper” hospital clowns. Each clown has to follow regular workshops which include strengthening skills in comedy, mime, magic and improvisation as well as skills working with sick children. As found on the website <http://hospital-clowns.org>, clowns learn the following principles when working in hospitals:

Clowns learn:

- Hospital hygiene, so they share love but not germs.
- How to work with hospital staff so that they don't get in the way.
- How to ask the child's permission (even without words) before they enter the room.
- A sensitivity to the moods, needs, and conditions of the patients: when a child has had enough, when quiet companionship is what is really needed, when a parent needs privacy, or needs to talk, and so forth.

Clowns practice:

- Moving slowly and clearly so as not to overwhelm.
- Modulating their voices and energy for the hospital environment.
- Creating new material, constantly improvising, as they almost never know who they will meet inside each room.
- Adopting their comic routines to the needs of each child: the energetic, the drowsy, the bored, the timid, the highly excitable, the heavily medicated, the toddler, the teenager.

It also includes specific techniques to stay professional, stay in character at all time, and to keep their personal emotions separate from their job (see the story in the Appendices).

What do they do?

The hospital clowns conduct clown rounds as a parody of the medical rounds. Laughter becomes the medical treatment. The clowns use a mix of juggling, mime, magic, storytelling, music and puppetry to help the patients forget their disease for a little while. The children is invited to interact and participate according to their possibilities.

The clown is as out of place in the hospital as the child, which gives them both a chance to establish trust and a real friendship. It has often been seen that the child — even the one who says loud that he hates clowns— would give the clown the same place he would give to his teddy bear only! This special relationship and the games proposed by the clown allow the child to express emotions, frustration, fear, all the feelings that he often keeps hidden from the parents. The children who are coping with serious illness especially are losing their childhood and being forced to deal with life and death issues. Most of them try to be brave in front of the adults —the caregivers and their families— to protect them in a way. The contact with the clown allows the hospitalised child as well as his parents and brothers and sisters to laugh and relax.

The clown's job is to get people out of their heads and into their hearts. A clown is in the present, vulnerable and innocent, often childlike in his antics. His aim is to touch people in their inner child and give them the permission to play, to let go for a moment their responsibilities and forget the dramatic aspect of the hospital.

The clown rounds improve the children's quality of life; music, magic and laughter reduce the stress and humanise the ward. The clowns help the children to keep a foot in normal life, to make contact again with their world of play and imagination. They allow the adults to have a moment of release. Shobi Dobi, an American clown doctor, who wrote the book, *The Hospital Clown, a Closer Look*, often gives a red nose to the kids' parents, tells them to go into the bathroom, to make at least ten funny faces and then come back to show them to their kid! That's one example among others to illustrate a way of releasing the tension and make everybody live the present moment.

The clowns make visits usually once a week in the medical and surgical wards; in the oncology, chemotherapy and dialysis units; in the psychotherapy departments; and the critical care areas such as intensive care, burns units, accident and emergency, post-op wards and transplant wards. They visit every child, from the one with a broken arm to the premature baby, as well as the child with a terminal illness. In a few hospitals, especially in Australia, they visit adults too.

Even though, at the beginning, the hospital staff was sceptical of the clowns, they quickly realised how important they were in the children's life and how they were making the caregivers' work easier since the kids were more confident and relaxed. Now, they ask the clowns to do "extra-ordinary" visits for example to interact

with a child during a bone marrow biopsy or during dressing changes in the Burns Unit.



A few rules

- The clown doctors are not doctors. They don't prescribe medicine or make any decision concerning a patient, nor move him or manipulate equipment. If necessary, a nurse will be called.
- The hospital clown starts the day by checking in at a nurses' station to gauge the atmosphere of the ward, to receive specific directions or suggestions about certain patients, to get to know the kids better, their illness and their mood of the day. In the book *Le Rire Medecin*, they ask the nurses for the forecast of the day.
- They always ask the patient's permission before entering the room. It can even be done with a puppet.
- The costume and the make-up should communicate fun and fantasy, but they mustn't be a threat to the children or to the equipment. They must always remember that a few kids are afraid of clowns.
- The clown doctors have to individualize their performance according to who is present. It's an improvisation every time; they never know what they are going to find behind the door they push. The focus is on the child; the clown has to put the child's needs above his own needs.

- They respect the confidentiality of the hospital and go through all the hygiene and disinfecting control.
- They need to be creative, and rather than ignoring all the equipment they sometimes find surrounding a child, they need to re-interpret its purpose. In *The Hospital Clown, a Closer Look*, Shobi gives the example of changing the child in a superhero receiving through all these little tubes some secret stuff to make him extra strong.

And most importantly:

- Don't try to be funny. Be fun, real and spontaneous and have a big open heart.

Conclusion

More than a thousand years of dealing with ill people by healing their body and soul with natural power.

Three centuries where the scientific discoveries were such that doctors were looking at a patient like at a medical dictionary.

Twenty years that finally a few people all around the world realised that humanity should be brought back into the hospitals.

The hospital clowns, or clown doctors, bring life and unconditional gentleness and compassion to a place where the doctors have to stick to their serious role and the nurses don't have enough time to listen and chat with the patients.

A hospital doesn't have to be a serious place; on the contrary it desperately needs red noses, laughter and joy to make people feel better and heal quicker, or to make their last days easier and more peaceful.

"I call it the balloon syndrome: to put a little bit of air in to help everybody to relax."

Joanie Spears

Director of Theodora Children's Trust

Appendices

Children's words



"It's good to see clowns at the hospital because we don't think about what is being done to us." *Kevin, 10*

"When I hear you in the corridor, I'm already happy." *Elsa, 12*

"I will never ever forget you." *A 16 year old patient*

"You clowns are making me feel so magical." *A 7 year old patient*

Adult's words

"The clowns bring a playful and imaginative dimension to the ward, the atmosphere is lighter, more relaxed." *Prof. Catherine Olivier, Pediatrician.*

"It's the first time I've seen my child smile all day." *A parent*

"If you can begin to laugh at yourself, then you will open up the bubble of joy inside you. May you never pass a mirror without making a silly face." *Shobi Dobi, a hospital clown*

One story: "I Love You Wollie" (as told to Shobi by Jackie Garner)

I was packing to go to a convention when I got a call from a hospital I'd never been to. I don't know how they found out about Lolli. They said "We have a little boy in ICU could you come as fast as you can." I had already packed my costume, but when I heard ICU, I had Lolli clowned up and at that hospital in 30 minutes. I had never and never since put on my makeup that fast. I could never makeup again that fast or that well except that it was something that I was called to do.

I get up to Pediatric ICU and as soon as the elevator doors open you can hear crying and moaning cause these kids don't like being there and they're hurting. Now ICU is normally glassed rooms, because they have to be able to see everything. You can see all the children in their beds. You haven't been called to see them, but all those children are watching you. So I go into a little boy's room - his name was Vincent. He is four and a half years old. And again you could hear moaning. I come around the corner and again in character voice "Hello" The doctor says, "You must be Lolli!" "Yes, and who is this handsome boy" The doctor introduces "This is Vincent." Lolli continues "Are you married? Are you engaged to anyone?" He doesn't say anything, he is just looking at me, but his eyes are smiling. He's not scared of me after all he's four and one-half.

The doctor says "Lolli, do you mind if we bring in a rocking chair - would you like to sit in a rocking chair and hold Vincent?" Lolli answered "Sure would" So, they brought in this beautiful white rocking chair. And again I can be seen by all the other children all around me from their beds. They lay a pad across my lap and they lay Vincent in my arms, and he is so close. His eyes immediately go to my jeweled heart nose. He's checking out my hair, my face and all the bright colors. And Mama is looking right over my left shoulder and Daddy's looking right over my right shoulder, so we are all close. "Lolli loves you, Vincent."

I can tell he wants to touch my nose. So I take his finger and push my nose and laugh. "This is little Lolli's laugh button. Tee hee, Little Lolli loves you, Vincent." Mama's over the left shoulder saying "I love you, baby" and Daddy says "It's O.K. son, Daddy's here."

About 30 minutes goes by - just quiet time of giggles and nose pushing. In that time I knew this child like my own. We made a connection that no one could ever separate. Yet, he had not said one word to me. All of a sudden, Vincent pushes my nose again and he giggles all the way to his toes. Just giggles. Not one tear. There was no pain. This is what happens, something magical happens when a clown is there with a child in a one-on-one.

He just had the sweetest smile in his eyes and face. And each time I would say "Little Lolli loves you, Vincent," and Mama and Daddy would say "I'm here, I love you." This time I pushed my nose and giggled and said "I love you." He took a breath and spoke, "I love you, Wollie." I wanted to change my name to Wollie, right there. Then he said "I love you, Mommy. I love you, Daddy." And with this, his eyes went up to my eyes and my nose. "You want to push my nose again." So I took his little finger and pushed my nose. As I said "Little Lolli loves you, Vincent," he takes in the deepest breath, his smile broadens and his eyes are glistening. Then he breathes out his last breath. He dies in Lolli's arms.

The doctor comes over and takes Vincent from my arms and the mother and father go with him and I'm thinking, I've got to get out of here. I've got to run. But I look up at all those kids around me. They don't know what just happened. They are watching my every move. I am the clown. I am not Jackie Garner dressed as Lollibelle - I am Lolli to them. I am the only clown they may ever see. So I wave "Hello" in Lolli's character voice, but I'm thinking I've got to get out of here. I go out the door and there is a child right there. "Hello, Lolli loves you." I'm thinking, if I can just get to the elevator, I can let this out. I'm half way down the hall and I can see the elevator button. "Hello, Hi" waving to the other children. Inside me, the mother I am, is screaming, but these kids don't see this. It does not show on my face, because I am Little Lolli the clown.

Jackie Garner cannot do this. God has a part in this, something greater has control of this for you when you do this with all your heart and you want to help the kids. He's going to help you do it. That's the only way you are going to get through it. I'm not a great person. I'm not superwoman. I just have to let go and let Him help me handle it.

So, I'm almost to the elevator, and here come Vincent's Dad. "Clown, wait!" Tears are running down his face and he is reaching into his pocket. "What do I owe you?" I answer softly "Nothing, what do I owe you!" And I leaned over and whispered into his ear. "There are children watching and I have to stay in clown character." And as I go to the elevator I wave. "I love you, Daddy. Bye! Bye!" I push the button and I see the down light flashing, but here comes the mother crying. "Lolli, please I need to see you." I answer in character "O.K. Mom." And I think that was the longest walk I ever made in my life - back down the hall toward the mother. When I get there, Mom just falls into my arms - and she is sobbing into my costume - and I can feel her tears go past my hair and down my neck. "Lolli, he never got to go to Disney World, my baby never even got to see the circus and all of that. Oh, did you notice the way he went, there was no pain. He was smiling, he was giggling." And Lolli whispered in her ear, "I know, Mom. He's going to be fine. You're going to see him someday and you're going to take up just were you left off. But other children are watching Lolli. I love you and from one mommy to another I do understand. Thank you for letting me be a part of this." She looked up, "We will never forget you, Lolli." Daddy comes out and they walk back down the hall. And there I am trying to get back to the elevator, again, in character waving to the children "Hello, Hi, Little Lolli loves you." The children for all they knew, the child fell asleep in my arms.

The elevator door opens and sure enough there was a mom inside with two kids. "Hello!" I'm thinking, soon I'll be outside and I can let go. And the lobby was full of kids, and the parking lot looked like Disney World. "Hello! How ya doing?" I get on the freeway and everyone is driving by waving at the clown - "Oh look there is a clown. Hello, Clown" I'm thinking, God find me a dirt road please! And I found one right after I asked for it. I drove down that road and there wasn't a soul on the road and I was able to let go and cry. These to me are the true tears of a clown. When you are touched by something and you realize that you are being used to touch and offer healing. Be it death or whatever, you never know what you are going to be asked to do.

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