

Clowning Around in the Hospital

By Bettina Velona

Laughter and giggles fill the room as a little toy cube spits out *Moooooos* and *Baaaaaahs*. No, you're not in a toy store, but at the outpatient chemotherapy/infusion area of Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center. You might wonder what there is to laugh about. Well, volunteers cheer up patients as they receive their treatments in an attempt to balance unpleasant medical procedures with some pleasant distractions.

MGH is among an increasing number of hospitals that are adding humor therapy to their care. The Cancer Center's HOPES Program in collaboration with the MGH Making a Difference Grant Program and the Volunteer Department, introduced the "Humor Cart" in April 2005. Patients can pick jokes out of a fish bowl, play with interactive toys and puppets, listen to funny tapes and soon will be able to watch old TV comedy shows.

Humor provides a human connection in an otherwise sterile environment. Laughing with the hospital staff not only helps pass the time, it helps patients release stress and anxiety about their illnesses and treatments. "Patients experience that regardless of what happened to them, they still have the ability to laugh," says Maureen Ward, Program Manager of the Volunteer Department. Less occupied with a stress response, the body can concentrate on healing. Research has shown that laughter also boosts the immune system and helps our bodies produce more endorphin, a natural painkiller.

In many hospitals nationwide, cheering up patients on inpatient floors has become a daily occurrence. The hope is to bring the Humor Cart to other areas of the Cancer Center within the next year.

Hey, we've always known that laughter is the best medicine. We know about the powerful interaction of body and mind. It's nice to see hospitals humanize their care by balancing conventional medicine with emotional support. Bravo, MGH!

Bettina Velona is a freelance writer living in Arlington

Jebena69@aol.com

Copyright © 2005

Traveling Laughter Club Takes OFF

on a Flying Carpet

at Jimmy Tingle's OFFBROADWAY



It can be magic, to show up as an audience and allow yourself to be swept away with laughter.

Don't know what to expect? Neither does Walter, your laughter leader. "For it to be fresh each time, the outcome has to be unexpected. It is those in the audience and their willingness to participate that makes each show unique," he says.

The first part of the experience is the traditional laughter club laughter exercises. This is the warmup, the chance to activate that part of your brain that allows your body to rock and roll with laughter.

For each laughter exercise audience members are asked to volunteer to share stage time with the laughter leader. As a volunteer it's your moment to shine and you don't have to worry about being nervous. If you are, just laugh yourself silly to make it go away.

Next come positional laughter exercises, how using body posture, the way you present yourself, can affect the way you laugh. This is followed by ten minutes of non-stop laughter. The final experience is the voice of Sharon.



The most important part of laughter is introspection, the noticing of how the laughter affected you. Sharon of the amazing voice has taken the audience by surprise with her angelic singing. After forty minutes of laughter by the audience her voice rounds out the experience by sending people's minds into a deep place of serenity for which they continue to feel grateful long after the singing has stopped.

www.artwiseheart.com/sharon