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The best medicine

A posse of clowns in lab coats, with red noses and floppy shoes are prescribing a dose of laughter for patients and doctors alike

by Ron Stang

Reader's Digest may be best associated with the phrase “laughter is the best medicine” for its joke column by the same name. But increasingly for doctors and other health-care workers laughter as therapy is growing in professional practice.

A recent study at the University of Maryland school of medicine in Baltimore found laughter relaxes or expands the inner lining of blood vessels, promoting blood flow but that in stressful situations, blood vessels contract. This, said the study, suggests emotions are closely tied to blood vessels and that people should laugh more to promote health. Laughter has also been credited with blocking the stress hormone cortisol and increasing salivary immuno-globulin A—which protects against infectious organisms entering the respira-

around in T-shirts reading Healing the World One Smile at a Time. A posse of clown doctors in lab coats, red noses and floppy shoes, occasionally interrupted by clapping and hooting. When delegates were introduced from around the world, one clown doc shouted, “I'm from Timbuktu!” When a delegate said he was 76 years old, “Dr. Tilly Ton-Ton,” started singing 76 Trombones.

But even when the clowns behaved, it was hard to get a serious word in.


Rhyming off the letters Klein said L stood for “letting go,” A for “attitude—change it!” U for
YOU need to find humour, no one else is going to do it for you," G for "Go do it—find some ways to lighten up," and H for humour itself—"look for it, it's all around us." Afterwards he had delegates hold an index finger to their nose and put another on their tablemate's earlobe and recite a Pledge of Laughter ending with "so help me, Groucho Marx."

Jim Czegledi, an ordained Presbyterian minister, told one session that if people in all professions don't watch it, they could suffer from TOTS disease—Taking Ourselves Too Seriously. For those in the overtaxed helping professions such as health care, he said, humour "is the antidote to stress" and "how we feel is largely how we respond" to events.

He told the story of famed Ontario doctor William Osler who, when asked by a younger colleague why he was whistling after seeing so many ill people, replied, "I can either weep or whistle." Czegledi said that attitude "helped give him some perspective."

Dr. Clifford Kuhn, a delegate and professor of psychiatry at University of Louisville in Louisville, Ky., who teaches residents the role of humour in cancer care, said that while humour might not be a cure-all, "we do advocate it as a resource that enhances the immune system." He said humour helps increase tolerance to both the illness's pain and pain from treatment drugs. And while in

one sense cancer is no laughing matter, in another "the world is still absurd even if you've got a diagnosis you don't want."

Another delegate, family physician Dr. Kenneth Shonk of Kitchener, Ont, who has long employed humour in his practice and given more than 600 talks on the subject, has his waiting room stocked with books such as those of Herman and The Far Side along with younger children's joke books. He also has big stuffed animals kids can hug if they're worried. "Yes," he said. "We have to deal with the serious things in medicine—cancer, stroke, heart disease—but we need to balance it with the lighter things in life."

Bernie Warren, a University of Windsor drama professor who founded Fools for Health in 2001, based the organization on groups like the French Le Rien Médecin and the U.S.-based Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit, which formed in the 1990s. He have also performed in waiting rooms "to break the cycle of tension" and "reset the clock" to help reduce frustration. Warren said the Windsor program has been accepted partly because he had already established strong community contacts with people like Windsor Regional Hospital CEO Dr. Martin Girash and Carol Derbyshire, executive director of the Hospice of Windsor.

If any doctor has doubts about the benefits of humour, they might want to watch the film Patch Adams with Robin Williams, based on the rebel doctor who wanted to treat patients humanely but in a slightly comic way. Clips of it were shown at the conference.

To quote Dr. Patch Adams, injecting humour into medicine can be "fun to do and not a sacrifice of your life, but in fact a jubilant thrill to help others."