"Your family member is sick and you can't shout at the doctor, but you can shout at the clown"
— Prof Warren

Ontario is four hours. We can't do anything about that; it's hospital policy." Behind him, his colleague is pulling kitchen implements out of a bag: a fork, a spatula, a corkscrew. "But if you want, we'll do your surgery right now, on this table." Several of the patients smile. A few laugh out loud. The atmosphere in the room lightens perceptibly.

The 'doctor' in question is Dr Haven't-a-Clue, the alter ego of Bernie Warren, a drama professor at the University of Windsor and head of an organization of professional clown doctors called Fools for Health, which uses humour to help alleviate a little of the gloom that attends most people's hospital visits. "It's amazing what happens when you just walk down the hall in a clown costume and smile at people," observes the upbeat Prof Warren.

When he started Fools for Health in July 2001 at the in-patient rehab program at Windsor Regional...
CLOWN DOCTOR
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Hospital it was originally intended as an eight-week pilot, but the service quickly became essential. "About week six, the hospital said, 'You can't leave.'" Nowadays Fools for Health consists of 10 clown doctors working in four locations in the Windsor area, in wards as diverse as adult oncology, pediatrics, emergency and palliative care.

Most recently, the group celebrated April Fool's Day and Windsor's Humour in Healthcare Week (March 27 to April 2) by hosting an international laughter symposium, with talks ranging from the profound ("Bringing Laughter to Cancer and Other Support Communities") to the peculiar ("Merry Love Making").

MEDICAL HERITAGE

Fools for Health wasn't just a whim for British-born Prof Warren; it's the culmination of his lifetime obsession with the links between humour, drama and health. Descended from a long line of wisecracking doctors, he was supposed to be an MD himself, and started out studying anatomy and physiology in university. "But I realized very early on, firstly, that I didn't like the sight of blood, and secondly, that I was pursuing somebody else's dream."

He left Oxford after his second year — "That didn't go down very well with my parents," he laughs — and worked for several years in community drama programs, often going into hospitals and special schools to teach life skills through role-play.

He earned a PhD in drama, which eventually led him from the UK to an appointment teaching drama therapy at the University of Calgary, followed by a joint professorship at McGill and Concordia Universities in Montreal. In 1988, he merged his interests in drama and medicine and set out to research the effects of humour on health. He unexpectedly discovered a long and rich history of clown doctoring. It seems the drama/medicine connection is as old as medicine itself. "Hippocrates's hospital on the island of Kos had troupes of players in the courtyards," he reports. "And there's a reference, in the 12th century, to one of [British king] Henry 1's fools starting St Bartholomew's Hospital." He also found precursors in 15th century Sufis, 19th century circus acts, and an organization from the southern US dating back to the 1940s called Clowns for Christ.

A 'FOOL' IS BORN

In 1990 he attended a lecture by celebrated doctor/wg Patch Adams (subject of a 1998 Hollywood film starring Robin Williams), and another by Caroline Simonds, a renowned street performer who was working in Paris leading a company of clown doctors called Le Rire Médecin. "Patch Adams was very charismatic, but he was largely a one-man show," Prof Warren recalls. "I looked at Caroline's work, and I thought, it's amazing — this is stuff that I could train my students to do."

The drama/medicine connection is as old as medicine itself

Taking further inspiration from a New York project called the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit, the two decided to collaborate on a paper, which then grew into a book, The Clown Doctor Chronicles. Prof Warren proposed to a Windsor hospice director that they start a clown doctor company at one of the local hospitals. She agreed, and Fools for Health was born.

CLownING AROUND

"People often assume we're volunteers," says Prof Warren. As contradictory as it sounds, all the clown doctors are professionals, and the selection and training process is quite rigorous. Many hold advanced degrees; they're auditioned, interviewed and trained extensively to work in different hospital units.

"Before we start the day, we meet with our contact person on the ward, and get notes about every patient," explains Prof Warren. "We're particularly interested in psychosocial aspects, but we need to know enough about their medical condition to do our work — have they had a surgical cut in their stomach? Should we not make them laugh?"
They quickly realized the relief they provide isn't only of the comic variety. "The clown doctor is the lowest of the low," says Prof Warren gravely. "One of the things we found, in oncology for example, was the clown doctors were often being shouted at, but not because of anything they did. What I started to work out was, they were playing the role of the scapegoat. Your family member is sick, and you can't shout at the doctor, you can't shout at the nurse, but you can shout at the clown."

Prof Warren admits it can be emotionally difficult for the clown doctor on the receiving end. "But it's actually very beneficial," he insists. "We provided a safety valve."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

But do clown doctors make a difference to quality of care? Mounting evidence suggests they do. "European research suggests that there are fewer absentee days when clown doctors work on the ward," says Prof Warren. "And when a clown doctor team is on the ward, healthcare providers talk more to each other and to the patients, and they smile more often."

The project has certainly caught on with patients and their parents, who "perceive that they're getting better health-care," says Prof Warren. The hospital brass are happy too. "We regularly get requests from parents requesting their children's treatments be booked at times when the clown doctors will be present," enthuses Joyce Chamberlain, director of the Patient Unit — Paediatrics at Windsor's Hotel Dieu Grace Hospital, "because they've experienced the calming effect the clown doctors have had on their children."

Prof Warren says the most important thing is the way clown doctoring and medicine complement each other. "Doctors and nurses work with the parts of the patient that are sick," he says. "We work with everything else."

For more information visit www.foolsforhealth.ca.