

Chapter 2

Is Hospital Clowning for You?

Know Yourself

There are many possibilities for clowns in hospitals. Yet not every clown with a caring heart is comfortable in or suited for all hospital situations.

Know what you're looking for



You need to know who you are and what you are looking for from the situation.

If you are a clown who really wants laughter from a large crowd, then hospital clowning is not for you.

A hospital room or ward filled with ill patients presents a completely different situation for a clown than a group of healthy participating people.

Don't expect responses

In the hospital, patients are sometimes unable to respond to you and your humor. Sometimes a response will come back very quietly and sometimes not at all.

The patient ALWAYS comes first

In hospital clowning, the needs of the patient and audience always come before the needs of the performer.

As Richard "Snowflake" Snowberg notes:
"Caring clowns are more interested in assisting people to forget their pains and problems than in generating applause or even laughter." ⁵

Why Caring Clowning is a difficult specialty



“Caring Clowning is one of the most difficult specialties,” says Carole “Pookie” Johnson, (*left*), a nationally known Caring Clown and Instructor.

“That’s because you have to be prepared to meet many different needs, not just of the patients but also of visitors, employees, and staff.”

Carole uses magic, puppetry, sight gags and much improvisation in her hospital visits at Stevens Hospital (Lynnwood, WA) and the outpatient clinics of Seattle Children’s Hospital and Regional Medical Center.

Not everyone can do it

Chris Montross, recreation therapist and a caring clown at St. Luke’s Hospital, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, agrees.

“Being a hospital clown is not something that everybody can do,” says Chris. “It takes a very special person. The hospital can be a scary place and hospital clowns need to be able to gear themselves to a change of emotions and to gear themselves to the situation at the moment.”

Emotional considerations are greater

Emotional considerations of your “audience” are greater. Unlike other types of clowning, sometimes your “audience” is one person. Patients experience greater physical and emotional stress, which affects the way they receive what you offer.

Also, you need to be able to manage your own emotions during difficult situations. “It’s important to be able to distance yourself from your feelings at the time in order to assist with the situation,” says Louise Weldon, R.N.

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Know your limits and trigger points

Every person who clowns has certain triggers and sensitivities to something. It's important to know yourself so you can tap into your real strengths and know which situations you might choose to avoid.

For instance, clowns whose sensitivities may overwhelm them in a pediatric unit or emergency room may wish to clown instead in a transitional care area where patients have less acute conditions. Your clown service can also benefit a hospital in its community relations outreach.

Questions to ask yourself

If you are considering clowning on treatment floors, ask yourself the following questions:

Can I manage my emotions during difficult situations?

Am I comfortable with the medicinal odors often found in hospitals?



Am I comfortable clowning with people who are in various stages of illness, from mild to critically ill, and with those experiencing various levels of pain?

Am I comfortable with the various noises in a hospital—for instance, the beeping of machines, phones ringing, emergency sirens—and am I able to not be distracted by them?

Will seeing people undergoing various nursing treatments and/or medical procedures be unsettling to me, i.e. people with IV's, nasal tubes, monitors etc.



The bottom line is: Know yourself. Know your hospital.

Know Yourself

Understand the Hospital Environment And Your Place in it

To know if hospital clowning is for you, you need to understand not only yourself and the type of clowning you prefer but also the very special requirements of the hospital environment and how you, as a clown, fit into it.

Learn about the hospital process

“You need to learn what the hospital process is all about,” says Suzanne DeTuerk, Director of Volunteer Services at Centre Community Hospital, State College, PA.

“When you think of a clown, you don’t think first of a hospital clown but of a circus clown and many people don’t know the place that clowns have as part of a patient’s care or a family’s relief from stress.”

A hospital clown needs to understand how people react when they have a loved one in the hospital or are in the hospital themselves for treatment.

It’s not like home

“Being in a hospital is not like being at home,” Suzanne DeTuerk says. “At home people are surrounded with familiar things –plants, pets, pillows, and family, but in the hospital, people are frightened—they’re afraid they will lose their identity and become just a statistic or an ailment. Hospital clowns can allay a patient’s fears, especially for younger or elderly patients.”

People are vulnerable

Rev. MaryRuth Smith, a pastoral counselor and former hospital chaplain, notes that with hospital patients, “You have taken their wallet, their jewelry, their professional garb. They are totally disrobed in every spiritual, emotional and physical sense and are extremely vulnerable and ready for someone to bring a covering to them.”



Is Hospital Clowning for You?

Their position is prone

“Their position is prone,” says Rev. MaryRuth Smith. “Even if they are in a chair, they are lower than the visitor. But they are the leader and what you respond to is the Spirit of God within their spirit. If you recognize the Spirit in yourself, you'll find it in the patient. The real interaction you have with them is a relationship of Spirit.”

Be part of the treatment team

“We want to make people comfortable and at ease,” says Suzanne DeTuerk. “They aren't just our ‘patients’ – they're people.”

“The whole idea of hospital clowns is to be part of the treatment team, not just volunteers and not just clowns. They must take their lead from the staff, nurses, doctors, ancillary personnel and the patient, family and friends, in doing all they can to make each person comfortable. Not every clown has to be lighthearted, but you do have to be caring and sensitive to the patient's needs.”

Leaders from prominent therapeutic clown programs emphasize how important it is to be part of the hospital wellness team.

Jane "Dr. Tickles" Abendschein, (right), Director of the Clown Docs Program at St. Louis Children's Hospital, notes that "one thing that has helped the acceptance of the Clown Docs program at the hospital has been our willingness to become part of the 'wellness team' and to not use humor to undermine the authority of the other staff."



The Clown Docs Program provides a unique opportunity to influence the future of medicine through its work with students at Washington University School of Medicine. First year medical students taking the school's credit selective course on “The Medicine of Laughter” shadow the Clown Docs on their clown rounds to observe the effects of humor in the hospital setting. (for more see p. 71.)

Earn and build trust with the medical staff

"We are considered part of the wellness team and that does not come automatically-- it must be earned," says Aviva "DR Huggabubbe" Gorstein of the Bumper "T" Caring Clowns. She served for 12 years as Director of Volunteer Services for the Vanderbilt Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

Korey Thompson, Artistic Director of Clowns for Children's Hospital of Wisconsin in Milwaukee notes that clowns must build trust with the medical staff.

"There is a mutual respect that grows as staff and clown work together over time," says Korey. "You work through high census days, impromptu birthday parties, and tornado alerts. You meet staff at funerals and at sock hops in the cafeteria."

Understand what a caring clown is and does

So different is a hospital clown from a traditional circus or stage clown that the terms "therapeutic" or "caring" are often used to describe them.

"I feel there is a distinctive difference in the clown as entertainer and one who is working in a healing environment," says Joan "Bunky" Barrington, Coordinator of the Therapeutic Clown Program at The Hospital for Sick Children, who adds "not all clowns working in hospitals are trained specifically or present themselves as specialized 'therapeutic' clowns."

Richard Snowberg describes the caring clown:

"Being a caring clown means that one is caring and a clown. You are not a clown that cares, but rather a caring individual that is a clown. The emphasis and importance is in being caring. It just so happens that your caring persona is as a clown.

"You need to place that caring aspect of your role in first place when entering a room and beginning to interact with a patient/resident. You are there to meet their needs in any way you can. It might be through entertainment. However, it might just be as a compassionate listener. You might not be funny but invaluable at this particular time in someone's life."

Ten Keys to the Caring Clown Clown Camp® Notebook 6

Is Hospital Clowning for You?



Be a humble servant

Curt "Doctor ICU" Patty of the St. Louis Clown Docs says "You have to be this humble servant. For instance, you might be called to just stand with someone. One time I was in a room where a grandmother was having a difficult time listening to the sounds as the medical staff put an IV line into her granddaughter and I just went and put my arm around her because she couldn't handle the sounds."

Different than a theatre clown

"What makes a hospital clown different from a theatre clown is a sense of service," says Shobhana Schwebke aka "Shobi Dobi," editor of The Hospital Clown Newsletter.

"Hospital clowns give up attachments to results of our performances, as a patient falls asleep in mid show or a doctor walks into a room or any number of interruptions.

"We are there for the patient, not to show off a performance. We often never see the results of our actions until days later, if at all. By the nature of our job, we do not even expect results from our actions. This is selfless service.

"When we say, 'how can I serve you' we offer what we have. It is not about status. It is about compassion. Egos are not involved here."