

Clowning Around

BY WAYNE ERB

Saturday Afternoon at Starship

It's Saturday afternoon at Starship hospital's emergency department. A sick boy is upset. The boy and his family speak little English, and the staff are having problems explaining to them what needs to be done. One of the nurses goes to get help. She returns with someone unexpected. Although the friendly figure has a white coat, she also wears a red plastic nose. This is Doctor U Who, one of the hospital's clown doctors.

From what Doctor U Who sees, she guesses the boy is scared and his bloodstream is flooded with the natural chemicals that are released when a person is stressed. His arm is tensed up, just as the nurse needs it to relax. Doctor U Who quickly decides how she can help. She suddenly goes floppy. Her performance is very funny, and the boy watches intently. Eventually, with the clown's help, he calms down, and the staff are able to get on with their job.

"When I left, I walked down the corridor in a ridiculous way," Doctor U Who later said. "The boy came to the door to watch. He was fascinated. But more importantly, he was now completely calm. His family looked very relieved."





Serious Work

Doctor U Who's real name is Jude Bishop. She's one of twelve clown doctors who work at Starship, the national children's hospital in Auckland. Other clown doctors work in hospitals in Christchurch and Wellington. Most of them have a background in theatre, circus, or puppetry – and sometimes all three. While they're not doctors, they are specially trained to work in hospital wards and emergency departments. Some clown doctors have studied medical clowning at university.

Like all clowns, the clown doctor's main tool is humour. "It's quite straightforward really," Jude says. "We use our 'characters' to establish a rapport with kids, then we make them laugh!" Often working in pairs, the clown doctors sing, play the ukulele, perform funny mimes, play tricks on each other, and basically act the fool. It might not look like it – but this is serious work!

"We make a real difference to how young patients feel," Jude says. "We distract children from all kinds of medical procedures, and we reduce their levels of stress and anxiety. This empowers kids in situations in which they have little control. We give them back a little bit of that control."

Jude says their work helps everyone: the children, their families, and even the hospital staff. "Laughter is a powerful tool," she says. "Sometimes it really is the best medicine." The doctors and nurses at Starship agree.



“ There's a really strong link between how you feel and how quickly your body heals. If a person's feeling more confident, more cheerful, more optimistic ... then they'll probably get out of hospital sooner. They're also likely to get better quicker, no matter what the problem is. ”

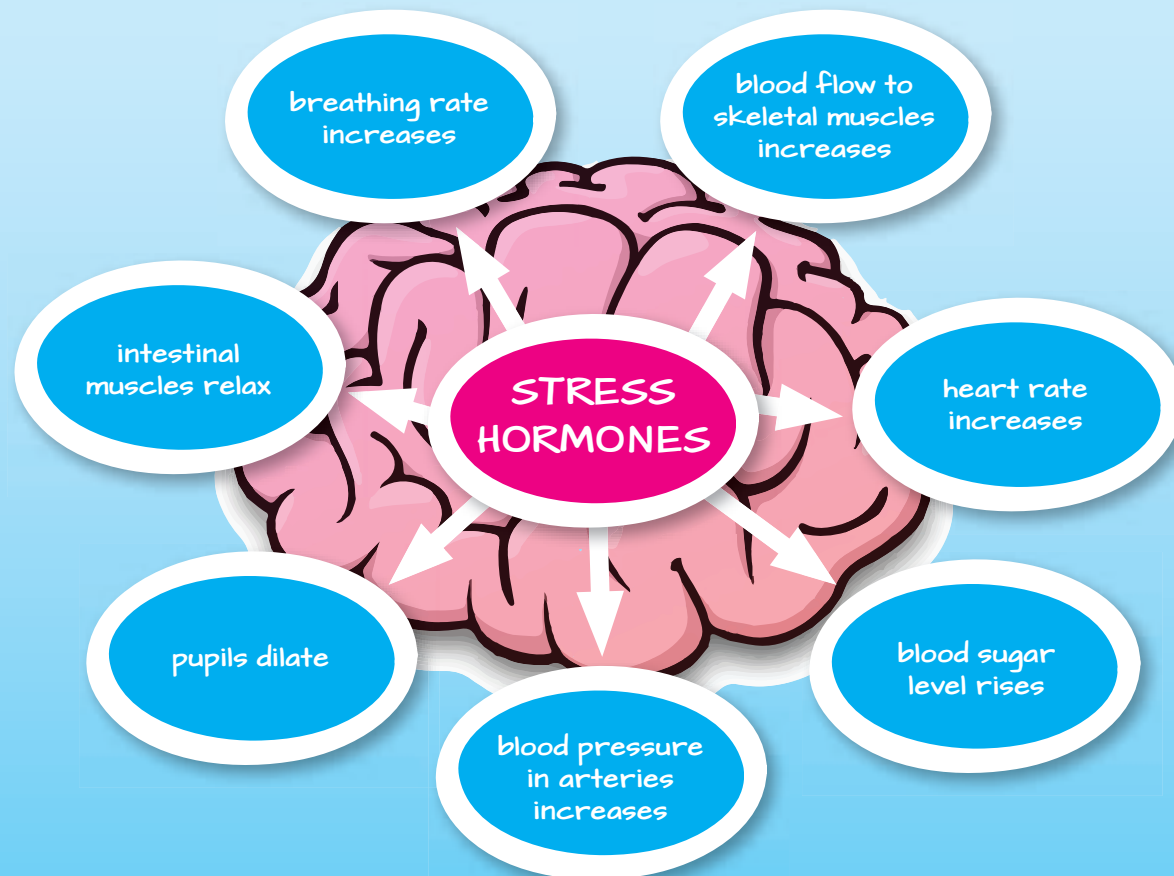
– Richard Aickin, emergency medicine specialist



Laughter: The Best Medicine

When a person is helped to feel less stressed – for example, by laughing at a clown – a positive change happens to the mix of hormones in their blood. Hormones are the natural chemicals that tell our bodies how to react to certain situations. Think about how you feel when you’ve climbed a big hill and finally reached the top (elated) compared with how you feel when you’re being chased by a dog (scared). These feelings are caused by hormones.

Over the last few decades, scientists have learnt a lot more about the important role hormones have to play when it comes to a patient’s recovery. “Hormones allow a person’s mind to communicate with their immune system,” says Roger Booth, a medical scientist who has studied how the body heals itself. “And our immune system helps our body to deal with illness.”



So if a person’s mind can communicate with their immune system, does this mean a stressed mind sends bad advice?

“That’s one way of putting it,” says Roger. “But, yes, we’ve learnt that bad thoughts and feelings can have a negative effect on your immune system, although some of this happens unconsciously. Long-term stress can definitely delay a person’s recovery.”

On the flip side, happy feelings help us to get better. “Laughter changes our hormone balance,” explains Roger. “It reduces the stress hormones, replacing them with the hormones that make us feel good.” These feel-good hormones send a positive message to a person’s immune system. They tell it to get on with the process of healing.

But of course the clown doctors already know this!





Doctor U Who and Jolene

Jolene has a broken leg. She's waiting to transfer to Palmerston North hospital, which is much closer to her home in Levin. Doctor U Who stops by to chat. This quickly leads to ridiculous card tricks (Jude's "deck" contains just two cards). Doctor U Who also plays music from a tiny trumpet and takes Jolene joyriding in the corridor. The two have a lot of fun before Jolene watches Jude move off, her handbag bulging with props, in search of other kids to entertain. How would Jolene describe the clown doctors? "Goofy – and they over-exaggerate everything. I find them really funny."

Jolene was born with a condition that causes problems with her blood vessels. This means she's a frequent visitor to hospital, something she has learnt to cope with. As well as talking with her best friend on the phone, having a laugh with the clown doctors leaves Jolene feeling much better. "The clowning around never stops," she says, "and the good feelings they bring stay with me."





Tools of the Trade

The peg earrings are a laugh. The dress looks very cheerful. The red nose ... it's essential! All these props help Jude to become Doctor U Who. But what about that large, spotted handbag she carries? What does Jude keep in there? She's more than happy to share her secrets:

- Stickers (lots of them)
- Maracas
- Spare red noses (for the patients)
- Toilet paper (to make finishing lines for running races, seatbelts for wheelchairs, and so on)
- A fly swat (although, of course, it's not a fly swat – it's a hand-powered air-conditioner, a cricket bat, a guitar, a frying pan ... it all depends on the occasion).



Different Needs

Sometimes, clown doctors leave their props in their bags. Not every patient is in the mood for a laugh. “You have to deal with each person as you find them,” says Jude, “and always remember that people have different needs. This is an important part of our training.”

Jude says that a clown doctor will never ask a patient point-blank how he or she is feeling. Instead, they are taught to read a child's face. To make a connection, clown doctors also look for clues in the room. Things such as a soft toy or book make great starting places for a conversation.

For Jude, each day is a learning experience. She remembers one girl especially: “She was flat on her back, unable to move. Only her head poked out from the top of her sheet, but the nurse said she could hear everything.” This gave Jude an idea.

“I said I would like to sing her a song if that was OK. When I finished, the girl moved her head and rubbed her cheek against my hand. She wanted to say thank you. That was a very special moment for me. I felt like I had made a difference.”



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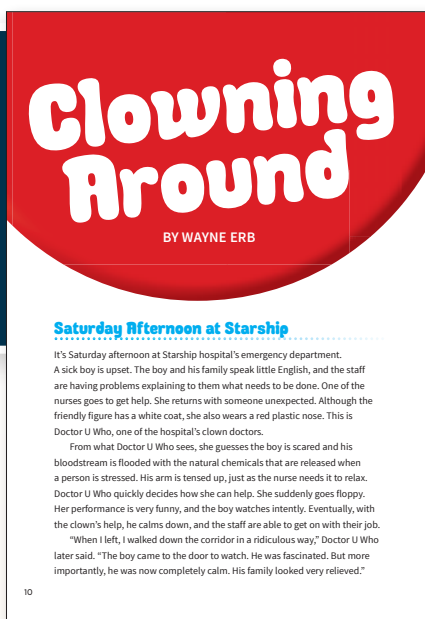
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Published 2015 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz
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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16332 2 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



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The New Zealand Curriculum
LEVEL 3

SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3, AUGUST 2015

Curriculum learning area

English

The Arts: Communicating and Interpreting
Health and PE: Relationships/Personal growth and development

Reading year level

Year 5

Keywords

clowning, clowns, doctor, emergency, health, hospital, humour, illness, immune system, medicine, Starship, stress