



## CLOWNTHERAPY IN MEDICAL TRAINING: CASE REPORT ON THE CONTEXT OF CHILD'S HOSPITALIZATION

### A PALHAÇOTERAPIA NA FORMAÇÃO MÉDICA: RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA NO CONTEXTO DA HOSPITALIZAÇÃO INFANTIL

### PAYASOTERAPIA EN LA FORMACIÓN MÉDICA - RELATO DE EXPERIENCIA EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA HOSPITALIZACIÓN INFANTIL

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#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** relatar a experiência de um acadêmico de Medicina na atuação como palhaço doutor em um hospital infantil, destacando a importância e a contribuição da palhaçoterapia na formação médica. **Método:** trata-se do relato de experiência de um acadêmico de Medicina, membro do projeto de palhaços doutores Smile on duty, com visitas semanais a um hospital infantil. **Resultados:** a introdução do estudante de Medicina à arte do palhaço proporciona uma abordagem prática dos conceitos de humanização e de integralidade do cuidado que, associados ao contexto de hospitalização infantil e à terapia do riso, destoam da abordagem biomédica e hospitalocêntrica ainda presente nos profissionais de saúde. **Conclusão:** verifica-se que a inserção do estudante de Medicina na arte da palhaçaria, durante a formação acadêmica, proporciona a quebra de paradigmas e de preconceitos difundidos por profissionais com escopo biomédico, redefinindo o conceito de cuidado.

**Palavras-chave:** Terapia do Riso; Medicina; Hospitalização; Arte.

#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to report the experience of a medical student as a clown doctor in a children's hospital, highlighting the importance and contribution of clowntherapy in medical education. **Method:** this is a case report of a medical student, member of the clown doctors project Smile on duty, with weekly visits to a children's hospital. **Results:**

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The introduction of the clown art to medical student provides a practical approach to humanizing concepts and care completeness that together with the context of child hospitalization and laughter therapy, breaks with the biomedical and hospital-centered approach still present in health professionals. **Conclusion:** it is verified that the insertion of the medical student in the art of clowning, during the academic training, provides the breakdown of paradigms and prejudices spread by professionals with biomedical scope, redefining the concept of patient's care.

**Keywords:** Laughter Therapy; Medicine; Hospitalization; Art.

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## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** informar la experiencia de un académico de Medicina en la actuación como payaso doctor en un hospital infantil, destacando la importancia y la contribución de la payasoterapia en la formación médica. **Método:** se trata del informe de experiencia de un académico de Medicina, miembro del proyecto de payasos doctores Sorriso de Plantão, con visitas semanales a un hospital infantil. **Resultados:** la introducción del estudiante de Medicina al arte del payaso proporciona un enfoque práctico de los conceptos de humanización y de integralidad del cuidado que, asociados al contexto de la hospitalización infantil y de la risaterapia, desatan el enfoque biomédico y hospitalocéntrico aún presente en los profesionales de la salud. **Conclusión:** se verifica que la inserción del estudiante de Medicina en el arte del payaso, durante la formación académica, proporciona la ruptura de paradigmas y de prejuicios difundidos por profesionales con ámbito biomédico, redefiniendo el concepto de cuidado.

**Palabras-clave:** Risaterapia; Medicina; Hospitalización; Arte.

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## INTRODUCTION

Clown therapy is defined as the implementation of clown methodologies, derived from the circus world, for the health-disease process, with the aim of improving the mood and emotional balance of individuals. The purpose of clowning (the art of the clown) is to bring smiles and laughter to a wide audience, from all age groups.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, there is a consensus that humor acts as a tool capable of allowing human beings to find happiness, even in adverse situations, such as falling ill.<sup>2</sup>

The clown's role in the hospital environment has become an essential figure in the health-disease process. Doctor clowns, as they are known for the most part, aim to reduce fear, stress, helplessness and anxiety in the hospital environment, actively participating in the evolution of the patient's healing and rehabilitation.<sup>2-4</sup> What was previously accepted only as an entertainment methodology, today constitutes an essential pillar of multidisciplinary teams that is widely disseminated in children's wards and with rapid progress among adults and the elderly.<sup>5-6</sup>

The work of doctor clowns as members of hospital teams was consolidated in 1986, in the United States, by clown Michael Christensen, co-founder of the Big Apple Circus, based in New York.<sup>4,6</sup> The initial performance of the doctor clowns aimed to demystify the figure of the doctor, making it more accessible and playful, especially for younger patients.<sup>4</sup> In Brazil, the pioneering work of the group Doutores da Alegria, the largest organization in the country, founded by Wellington Nogueira in 1991, a former member of the first group of doctor clowns from the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit, who visited hospitalized children in the world, deserves mention.<sup>7</sup>

In the hospital context of children's hospitalization, the clown becomes an ally capable of offering the child emotional support, while acting as an agent of play therapy through the diversity of the children's universe, music therapy and reading. In this light, the partnership developed by the clown doctor has four major fields of impact: physiological, emotional, cognitive and social.<sup>2-3</sup>

At the physiological level, the organic smile response affects the metabolism as a whole so that the conquered smile is able to modulate the immune system through the release of endorphins. In the emotional field, the clown replaces the anxieties inherent in the pathological process with positive feelings. Cognitively, it stimulates the imagination and the development of new forms of child expression, removing it from an environment of pain and suffering and, finally, in the social field, the interaction established by the doctor clown improves the relationship between the medical team, the patient and the family, promoting better adherence to treatment and consequent reduction in hospital stay.<sup>2-3</sup>

The art of clowning goes beyond the known effects on the patient and emerges as a methodology for bringing the medical student closer to understanding the pain and suffering of the sick in the face of academic training focused on the disease and not on the individual. Thus, this article aims to report the experience of a medical student in acting as a doctor clown in a children's hospital, highlighting the importance and contribution of clown therapy in medical training.

## **METHOD**

The study is an experience report of a medical student from the Federal University of Alagoas, a member of the Smile on duty university extension project. The Smile on Duty is an extension project linked to the Dean of

Extension (PROEX) of the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL) through the Faculty of Medicine (FAMED), in partnership with the Dean of Extension of the State University of Health Sciences of Alagoas (UNCISAL).<sup>8</sup>

Started in 2002 and currently operating in six hospital units in the city of Maceió, the project is a parameter, in the State of Alagoas, in clown therapy and play therapy, with the national group Doutores da Alegria as a reference in the activities. Hospital visits took place weekly, on Saturdays, from 2 pm to 5 pm, at the Children's Clinic Daisy Breda, in the city of Maceió, Alagoas, in the period 2017-2018.

## RESULTS

The experience report was based on the experience of a medical student, during the period of one year (2017-2018), in the university extension project Smile on duty. The results were constructed based on three testimonies collected in the exposed period.

According to statement 1, the process of immersion in the art of clowning precedes the practical approach in hospitals so that the student is invited to an altruistic view of child suffering when developing the character of the doctor clown. The construction of a story, capable of captivating the child's attention and, in parallel, approaching the hospitalization process, challenges the student to convert the pain related to illness into a feeling to be overcome through play therapy.

### TESTIMONY 1

*Son of Dona Canina and Mr. Ossinho, every Saturday I board the train at Smile on duty, distributing affection and loyalty to the sick children. In my suitcase, I always carry the magic ingredients of joy: peace, companionship, love and solidarity.*

*A long time ago, my owner, Pedrinho, fell ill and started living in a hospital. As the doctors did not allow the entry of animals, the Wizard of Oz lent me his top hat so that I could assume the human form and, thus, spread affection in all beds.*

*I am sure that happiness is found in our dreams, that is why I am trained as a Tourist Guide for Imaginary Worlds and as a Heart Detective by USP (Smile on duty University). Since then, I defy the laws of Physics and Medicine, unraveling the mysteries of love and suffering through the power of the eye! (Dr. Focinho, my story).*

Throughout the period of participation in the project, one of the main attributes of the doctor clown is achieved, the altruistic being, so that the donation by the other is rewarded by the feeling of well-being provided to the child.<sup>9</sup> As shown in statement 2, the cognitive, affective and behavioral components of empathy are approached in a proactive and unconscious way by the hospital experience, under the prism of exercising compassion and serenity, from the moment when the student internalizes the look of the patient and the context associated with hospitalization.

## **TESTIMONY 2**

*Our life is defined by great surprises. Today, on duty, I felt what it really means to be a doctor clown. Often, we have an exhausting week, victim of the stress that comes from routine, and we don't expect the shift to be able to give us back the strength to move on and, especially, change.*

*Undressing all ego and listening to phrases like these makes us find the real meaning of our profession: "I will stop your watch, so time will not pass!"; "I put glue in my hand so I wouldn't let you go!"; "Does your mother really have to pick you up at five? Tell her that you made a friend and will stay at the hospital with me!"; "Can I give you another hug, Dr. Focinho? So, I'm going to cry [...]."*

*Only when we allow ourselves to feel what the patient wants to transmit to us, are we able to express a real look of love. I am sure that, throughout the whole experience to be lived in the Smile on Duty, I will be someone capable of understanding the dichotomy between the pain and the affection present in the eyes of our sick. (Dr. Focinho, August 2, 2017).*

Therefore, the introduction of the medical student to the art of the clown provided a practical approach to the concepts of humanization and integrality of care, which, associated with the context of child hospitalization and laughter therapy, differ from the biomedical and hospitalocentric approach still present in professionals health and educational institutions in the country, as evidenced by the statement 3.<sup>10</sup>

## **TESTIMONY 3**

*If homesickness is what makes things stop time, I am sure that every smile sown over the past few months not only persevered in the lives*

*of our children, but also permanently transformed the heart of the medical student who formed Dr Muzzle on Saturday afternoons.*

*Today, behind the makeup and behind the joy on my face, I bid farewell, with tears and with a deep heart, to this project, a true life experience, which demonstrated that only two things are necessary to transmute the life trajectory of a human being: love in the heart and the smile on the lips! (Dr. Focinho, May 5, 2018).*

## **DISCUSSION**

The hospital works as an antithesis to the home so that children's hospitalization is a process, sometimes traumatic to the child's psychological and cognitive development.<sup>11</sup> There are several stressors involved, from the separation of support networks (family, school and friends) to the feeling of constant threat in the context of pain and suffering inherent to the pathological process, associated with the inadequate conduct of the multidisciplinary team to the children's universe, It is necessary to review the intervention of health professionals to the sick of this age group, especially.<sup>1,11</sup> In this perspective, the development of clown therapy throughout medical training is an effective alternative to existing biomedical models, in order to provide the humanization of those who, one day, will be agents of hope.

The Smile on Duty project is inserted, in view of the proposal to insert a new approach to support patients. Prior to the start of activities in the program, after training, members are invited to develop a doctor clown character (Figure 1), with name, clothing, tools and individual stories (Testimony 1).

**Figure 1. Dr. Snout, Doctor clown.**



In this first impact, the student confronts his own life story, as a child, and reveals the fears inherent in the doctor-patient relationship through insertion in an environment that is at odds with the context of human pathology. Parallel to this, the student perceives an inner call to discover, foster and perfect his artistic skills, which not only benefit the development of the project, but also remove him from a university environment of physical and emotional exhaustion. It is

present, following this precept, the transition from the biomedical and hospital-centric model to an integrated vision of care.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, it is worth mentioning that the change in mentality inherent to the protocol rigidity of medical culture represents a constant challenge in the training of new professionals, since a large part of the humanist discourse remains retained by university theoretical frameworks.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the development and use of tools capable of overcoming the vertical transmission of information in the classroom provide a more active and integral view of care, such as laughter therapy, with the work of doctor clowns.<sup>13-14</sup>

Parallel to this, acting in the context of children's hospitalization, in particular, fosters even more understanding of the scenario of pain and suffering, in view of the singularities inherent to the children's universe, such as the spontaneity and sincerity that are characteristic of looking and speaking of child. The future doctor, therefore, is driven to deconstruct the barriers associated with the medical culture of impersonality.

Based on this assumption, the medical student, burdened with the university's responsibility for training, is challenged to get rid of everyday stress and, from the moment the role of the clown enters the scene, not only does the transformation of pain occur the one who was given the smile, but also the recognition of the true meaning of humanization and subjectivity of being (Testimonies 2 and 3). Thus, strictly academic ties are broken by the student's performance as a doctor clown and, consequently, the smile offered by the child as a sign of detachment from the negativity of hospitalization promotes the internalization of comprehensive care, developing a new approach to care. health-disease process.

## **CONCLUSION**

The insertion of the medical student in the art of clowning, during the academic training, provided the breaking of paradigms and prejudices spread by professionals with biomedical scope, who saw care as something mechanical and protocol, without first reflecting on feelings and the particularities of each individual, especially the child. In this perspective, being a doctor clown goes beyond play therapy and, as Charles Chaplin spread throughout his career, the belief in laughter and tears works as an antidote against hatred and terror.



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