

Sick children offered gift of laughter

Ottawa nurse behind clown's frequent visits to CHEO

BY CATHERINE ALLISON

Her bright yellow jacket has six roomy pockets to hold magic tricks and stickers.

Her red pants are edged with white polka dots, and wisps of blue hair poke out from under her patched straw hat. Her red and yellow shoes are size 15 and noisy. Her colourful clothes attract children's attention. But it's the smile in her eyes that captivates them.

Molly Penny is a therapeutic clown and she uses play, gentle humour and laughter to help minimize the stress of hospitalization for patients and families at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

While the therapeutic clown program is new to CHEO, the hospital is not new to Molly Penny. When she takes off her shiny red nose and her gigantic shoes, most hospital employees recognize her as Ruth Cull, a nurse who has worked in the operating room for 28 years. When she is not clowning, Ms.

Cull will continue to scrub with the surgical team, three days a week.

CHEO's clown program was launched in April, with the help of Toronto-based Therapeutic Clown Canada, a charitable foundation. Its director, Mary Hirst, says CHEO's clown program will be funded for the next two years, thanks to the generosity of an anonymous Canadian businessman.

When four-year-old Mirja Reid saw Ms. Cull blowing bubbles in the medical day unit, she was so delighted she turned to her father and said, "Imagine! Bubbles in a hospital!"

Later, after inviting the clown to follow her to the treatment area, she was so distracted by the "touchable" bubbles floating above her bed that she barely noticed the needle sliding into her thigh muscle to deliver a dose of medication.

Ms. Cull always asks permission before entering a child's room or personal space.

"It's the only time in hospital that a child can say 'no,' and I have to respect that. They can't say no to a nurse when it's time for a blood pressure check or blood work. But they can say no to me, so they have a little



WAYNE HIEBERT, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ruth Cull in her clown Molly Penny persona visits children hospitalized at CHEO. Here she entertains Naomie Szanto, right, 2, from Petawawa, and Jarred Helmer, 4, from Timmins.

bit of control."

Ms. Cull works closely with child life specialists who let her know which child may need a special one-on-one visit. She even had a parent stop her in the elevator last week to ask her to pay a visit to the intensive care unit. The seven-year-old boy in the ICU was too weak to speak, but his eyes never left her face as she played

him a tune on a 15-centimetre violin.

Ms. Cull became interested in the healing effect of humour more than five years ago. She attended several seminars and conferences on therapeutic humour, including one last April where she met Patch Adams, the American physician who inspired the movie of the same name starring Robin Williams.

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