

# JUST KIDDING FOR THE HEALTH OF IT

Clowns expand therapeutic role in hospital

By Bill Redekop  
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WINNIPEG — They're the worst guests a hospital ever has. They flirt with doctors, use their stethoscopes for telephones and play accordion in the hall — and no one does anything about it. That's because the kids love it when Dr. Giraffe and Dr. Cauliflower turn the adult world of a hospital upside down.

Caroline Simonds and Anne Vissuzaine, therapeutic clowns at Le Rire Medicin in Paris, visited Winnipeg's Children's Hospital for a week of professional development.

"We have a grant to come here and absorb as much clown richness as we can," said a laughing Simonds, alias Dr. Giraffe. Simonds said they were drawn to the city by the work of Winnipeg's Karen Ridd, who pioneered therapeutic clowning in 1986.

"It was groundbreaking," said Simonds. "It put this profession on the map. The clown has since become a great tool for hospitals."

Therapeutic-clown programs have blossomed around the world. New York has gone from two clowns in 1987 to 40 today, said Simonds. Paris now has four, and Ridd recently started a clown program at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

David Langdon, alias Hugo, resident clown of Winnipeg's Children's Hospital, said one thing



CP photo

David Langdon (left) helps entertain patient Pamela Wankling.

he's learned from his Parisian colleagues is that children love seeing clowns break decorum.

"They're very naughty clowns," he said. "They cause a lot of pretend trouble."

Langdon, 41, said a large part of his job is relieving stress and anxiety.

He tells a story about a small boy from northern Manitoba who was shot in the stomach a few years ago while hunting.

The boy's recovery was stymied because he refused to move and would just lie curled up on his bed.

When the boy was brought to Winnipeg to see a physiotherapist, Langdon tried a series of routines but could get no response.

"Finally, I was doing this thing where I try to put this clown doll to

sleep, and I fall asleep instead. I'm lying there on the floor and the physiotherapist asks him how they can wake me up.

"The little boy got up — we didn't even know he could walk — went to the sink, gets a glass of water, and pours it on my head. Everybody was laughing, his parents and his grandparents. It was like a miracle."

Langdon said much of his work with children is interactive.

"I do a lot of magic that doesn't work for me, but it works when the child tries it."

"It empowers the children," said Renee Ethans, with the hospital's child-life department.

"The clown gives the children opportunities to correct him. They're given choices."

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