

# Comic relief

### Laughter can promote healing, ease tension

'It's the social glue that binds us together'

MICHAEL B. DAVIE  
STAFF REPORTER

Laughter is good medicine — take it from Posy the Clown.

Young children with cancer tend to burst into giggles when Posy visits them at the Hospital for Sick Children.

She washes her hands and fumbles with the roll of paper towels, unravelling a massive amount until the giggling child tells her to rip the paper. Posy also likes to blow bubbles with hand soap, antics that often bring a smile to the child's parents.

Clowning around, in one form or another, has therapeutic benefits for children and adults alike, as those in health-care professions can attest.

"Laughter relieves stress and tension," says Posy (a.k.a. Camilla Gryski), who's a member of Sick Kids' therapeutic clowns program. "It allows an escape from worries."

With wildly curly, purple hair, Posy will appear at a child's hospital room door. But she won't just walk in.

"I always ask if I can come in," she explains, "and if the child doesn't want to see me, I leave. A child's room is a privileged space. But normally they do want to see me."

Clown visits ease tension and make the institutional setting more friendly and relaxed, according to Bunky the Clown (a.k.a. Joan Barrington), who heads the clown program.

Children who otherwise have little control over their hospital stay are empowered to direct the play and advise

she explains. And youngsters who are withdrawn often come out of their shells, which can assist the treatment process.

"We remind children that they are still children who can laugh and be silly and have fun," Bunky explains.

Mike Moore is a Brantford-based motivational speaker who specializes in humour and works with the medical profession, as well as various businesses and organizations.

"Humour is great therapy — it's the social glue that binds us together and helps us relate as people," says Moore, who cites as an inspiration Dr. Patch Adams, a U.S. physician who believes joy and happiness are the most effective drugs known. (His playful approach was made famous by Robin Williams in the 1998 movie *Patch Adams*.)

Moore says another source of inspiration is *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins, who developed ankylosing spondylitis, a debilitating illness, while in Russia in 1964.

Cousins checked out of hospital and into a hotel where he took vitamin C, watched funny movies and credited humour for restoring the use of his limbs and allowing him to return to work. He died in 1990 of an unrelated heart attack.

"Sharing a joke with others can make everyone laugh and feel good," Moore says. His seminars teach medical co-workers to share humour among themselves — creating a more relaxed, light-hearted atmosphere staff and patients are likely to enjoy.

Christine McCoy, a registered massage therapist in Simcoe, describes Moore's seminars as "very funny," and finds a cheerful approach helps injured patients relax and smile.

"I think you can recover much faster from an injury if you can laugh a while."

Laughing can ease pain, says Dr. Robert Buckman, an oncologist at Toronto Sunnybrook Regional Cancer Centre and author of several health-related books. Laughter "releases endorphins — natural painkillers — so laughing actually temporarily reduces pain," he says.

Buckman says he's personally experienced hours of pain-free relief from crippling arthritis while laughing through comedy movies. And he encourages patients to chuckle at TV shows and movies that amuse them.

"When you're laughing, there can be a sense of euphoria and well-being. You mentally clear the decks and ignore your problems for a while. It can be a great coping mechanism when dealing with illness."

He occasionally shares amusing excerpts from his new book *Human Wildlife — The Life That Lives On Us* (Key Porter Books, \$32.95). For example, he describes a "very nasty" tapeworm and warns readers "you shouldn't try to keep one as a pet."

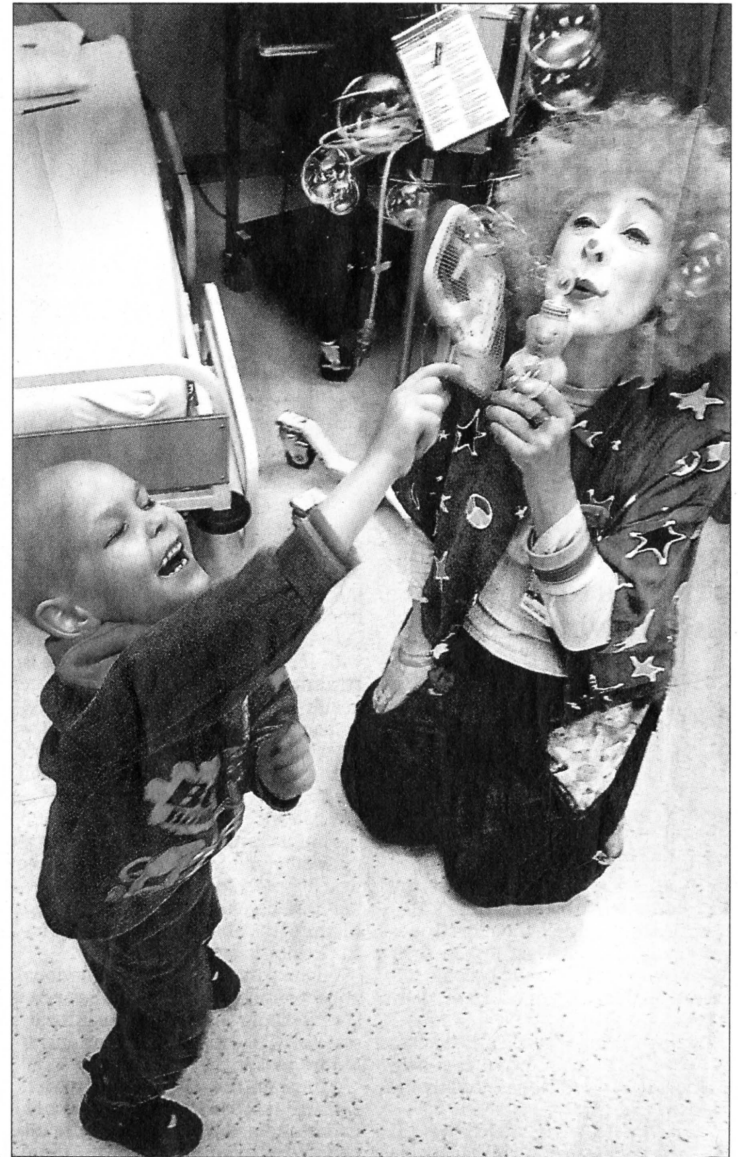
Buckman takes his sense of humour into television shows he's hosted, including a recent series based on this book.

He's also a familiar face to many viewers from such popular science and medicine programs as TVO's *Vital Signs* and the Gemini-award-winning *Magic Or Medicine?*

But comic relief has to be given in the right doses and at the right time, he says.

"Never inflict humour on anyone," he advises.

Contact information: Mike Moore: 519-753-0702 or [www.motivationalplus.com](http://www.motivationalplus.com); for Robert Buckman, contact the Lavin Agency: 416-979-7979; therapeutic clowns program at Sick Kids: 416-



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Posy the Clown spends some time with 5-year-old Andrew Doble at Sick Kids.