

Therapy just clowning around

By ELAINE MOYLE
Toronto Sun

The peal of children's laughter is the last thing you'd expect to hear in a hospital but that's one of the secrets behind Bunky and Posy's success.

The therapeutic clowns coax smiles from frightened young patients and hold trembling little hands at the Hospital for Sick Children.

"It's a concept that's out of the ordinary. Children are shocked to see clowns in a place where people are ill," says Joan Bunker, alias Bunky. "That's what gives them such a thrill."

Bunky has been spreading sunshine throughout the hospital for three years. Her shy, subdued sidekick, Posy, leaped into the act two years ago.

Canadian clowns are mute

The pair, whose bedside antics are sponsored through corporate and private donations, are two of only three therapeutic clowns in Canada. The third works in a Winnipeg hospital.

The ability to cheer frightened, ill children requires specialized training, says Bunker. Although it's a concept that's practised around the world, the roles of these hospital jesters vary from country to country.

In some places, clowns assume an entertainment persona, chatting and performing schticks for bedridden audiences.

The Canadian approach is unique, says Bunker, because clowns are mute and conduct gentle play therapy.

"Silence transcends all language and cultural barriers," she says. "English is a second language for some children and others regress to speechlessness as a coping mech-



HEART TO HEART ... Bunky the clown brings a smile to the face of Ryan Chiefari, 2, at the Hospital for Sick Children. Ryan, who had open heart surgery on Nov. 20, 1996, is in hospital having a monitor installed.

anism. Clowns break down these barriers, enabling interaction and communication to happen at a deeper level."

Before visiting each child, Bunky and Posy

are aware of their medical history. They take their cues from the patients.

"The child is the focus," says Bunker. "He or she decides if they want to play and how.

The kids set their own limits and I respond to what they do."

Such interaction empowers youngsters, who feel helpless in a hospital setting, she adds.

"They have no choice over their illness, the medication they take and the doctors who care for them," Bunker says. "We offer them plenty of choices."

It's not only the kids who benefit from the clowns' antics. Bunky and Posy prompt chuckles from parents, medical staff and maintenance workers.

"We bring life, laughter and silliness wherever we go and that alleviates tension and stress," says Bunker. "We normalize the environment and remind people that these patients are still children who learn through play."

'Vulnerable and forgetful'

The clowns, who present themselves as peers to their small spectators, ease the anxiety for children undergoing tests and being hooked up to intravenous drips.

"Bunky is very vulnerable and forgetful," Bunker says. "Sometimes he can't tie his shoes so a role reversal happens. Suddenly it's the child who's the caregiver."

Days are long, admits Bunker, who dons her costume at 8:30 a.m. and visits patients until 5 p.m. The fatigue and emotional strain don't take their toll until she steps out of her clown suit.

It's "the artistic distance," she says, that helps insulate her from the heartache of acquainting herself with ill children.

"The parents are very brave and the children are the heroes," Bunker says. "I'm astounded by their strength as they battle illness each day."

— Stan Behal, SUN