



*Where Innovation Meets Inspiration*



**Dream Doctors Project:  
The Therapy of Laughter for Those in Need**

**August 2009**

**"Great things happen between two pairs of eyes and one  
large red nose."**

Renana Lotem Ophir, Medical Clown

The University of Haifa has recently launched a pioneering academic program to train students in the field of **medical clowning**. Medical clowning is a new interdisciplinary therapeutic method aimed at assisting the patient through humor, folly, fantasy, and games. Taking a dramatic departure from the alienated, technical approach of white-coat medicine, medical clowns, or ***dream doctors***, as they are sometimes called, create an atmosphere where patients are willing to take necessary mental and emotional steps to participate in their medical treatment.

### Send in the Clowns

Medical clowning has increasingly become part of a holistic approach adopted by hospitals around the world to help patients and in particular, children, recover and heal with optimal ease and effectiveness.



The goal of medical clowning is to empower patients and to help overcome anxieties, frustration and difficulties they may encounter during hospitalization. Patients who require continuous care and prolonged hospital stays may even react adversely by withdrawing emotionally or spiraling into depression. Medical clowns create an intimacy and connection with their patients by virtue of their close proximity and one-on-one interaction.



### University of Haifa's Pioneering Program

**For the first time ever**, students can earn an undergraduate degree in this exciting new field from the University of Haifa's Department of Theatre and the Department of Multidisciplinary Studies. Inaugurated in 2006, the University's unique BA program provides medical clowns with a range of skills that enable their integration into the field of healthcare in hospitals all over the country.

The University of Haifa's program includes practical studies in clowning, medical clowning, acting skills, the history of theater and the history of clowning. Graduates of this program will acquire tools for providing therapy and will gain deeper understanding of the medical effects of their work. Some may choose to continue their studies towards a Master's degree in the University of Haifa's Graduate School of Creative Art Therapies.



## Laughter is the Best Therapy

Therapeutic clowns use laughter, gags and general silliness to find ways of reaching sick people and helping them to forget their pain and suffering. When interacting with the clown, patients in the hospital are able to remember that they have an existence outside that



of being a patient. While the medical staff focus on the sickly and dysfunctional aspects of the patient, the clown focuses on the healthy, positive elements. They often have to look for them, stimulate and discover them as they may be invisible in the presence of the ailment.

## Tearing Down the Wall of Fear



Clowning opens up avenues of communication with patients in cases where the medical staff is unable to.

Doctors may ask the medical clown to help them build a relationship with a frightened or stubborn patient, or to help the child agree to take

medication or cooperate in medical tests. Even semi-comatose patients of all ages have made contact with their surroundings after being stimulated by clowning.

Instead of entertaining patients during the afternoons and in down time, clowns are taught to work side-by-side with doctors conducting rounds in the morning to assist in patient treatment. The student clowns in the program usually work one on one - one clown to one patient. Mock checkups, especially the taking of temperature and pulse are routine gags. Pretend consultations and mock emergency operations are also common.

## Three Profiles of How Medical Clowns Make a Difference

### **An Oriental Clown Dance for Patient N.**

*Some patients enjoy the medical clown's visit so much, they pursue further connection. Consider N., a middle-aged female dialysis patient who would activate her mobile phone as soon as she saw the medical clown approaching. Having set her mobile phone to a Middle Eastern music ringtone, she would signal to the clown that she expected him to dance for her. The clown would react in a wild parody of undulating, belly dancing, as if he were a puppet being controlled by the patient. For the length of the dance, N. felt empowered, and experienced a sense of control returned to her. She would watch the clown dance with a huge smile on her face. The clown would flirt with her playfully and she would respond. Feeling appreciated, N.'s general wellbeing and outlook quickly improved, creating a positive effect on her attitude to her health.*

### **An Imaginary Oud**

*Medical clowns are trained to look for a source of inner strength within the patient to aid their recovery. They learn to connect with the patient through some aspect of the patient's life that is important to them.*

*C., a musician, had been diagnosed with cancer. Since the day he received the diagnosis he had stopped playing his favorite instruments-the fiddle and the oud (a Middle Eastern string instrument, similar to the lute). The medical clown decided that he too could play the oud, and he began playing an imaginary one, holding it in his hands and producing the sound with his tongue. C. was very amused and highly appreciative of the clown's ability to accurately mimic the sound of the string instrument. More importantly, following the clowning session, he decided to start playing again, a decision that marked a significant improvement in his mood and his general state of mind.*

## **A Lithuanian Chess Champion**

*Another patient, a former marathon runner and chess champion, was lying in his hospital bed with no desire to live. He had given up and was waiting to die when the medical clown paid him a visit with a chessboard. Proclaiming himself Andre Balishnikov, Chess champion of Lithuania, he enticed the patient into a chess game. The patient became lively and interacted with the clown. By using a game close to the patient's heart the clown was able to remind the patient that he had other aspects to his life apart from being a hospital patient.*

## **The Department of Theatre**

Mr. Ati Citron is Director of the Medical Clowning Program at the University of Haifa's Department of Theatre, which is now embarking on its fourth year of academic and artistic activity. Mr. Citron has extensive experience as a professional director in Israel's theatre community. The Department's aim is to further theatre research as well as train students in the various fields related to the art of the theatre: acting; directing; set, costume and lighting design; puppet theatre; theatre in education (a joint program with the School of Education), social theatre, playwriting and theatre production. The Department's faculty consists of both academic scholars and practitioners of the theatre, all prominent in their respective fields, and most of whom are constantly active in the various facets of the professional theatrical scene in Israel.

## **Request for Support for the Dream Doctors Project**

**To support this innovative and unique program, we respectfully request \$150,000, which would provide scholarships to enable twenty students to complete their academic degree in medical clowning.**

The University of Haifa, the only liberal arts university in northern Israel, sits atop Mount Carmel and presently serves a student body – the most pluralistic in the country – of more than 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Instruction is offered within the framework of six faculties: Humanities, Social Sciences, Law, Sciences and Science Education, Social Welfare and Health Sciences and Education. The University's dual mission of first-rate higher education and service to the community at large is manifested in the equal educational opportunities open to all sectors of the society and the many forms of programs promoting social outreach. Among community projects initiated by the university are several aimed at fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between all cultures on campus and beyond. Research is carried out under the aegis of the Faculties and by a variety of centers, institutes and laboratories. An Overseas Studies Program draws students from around the world. Integration into the larger academic sphere occurs through exchange and research agreements with various universities around the world.

### **Contact Information**

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