

Clown-doctors funny-bone specialists

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By Jessica Howard

Comic Pain Relief. Goal of hospital visitors is to keep patients in stitches.

Clowns Melissa Holland and Olivier-Hugues Terreault entertain 6-year-old Fabienne Kokic during visit to Montreal Children's Hospital. (photo : Allen McInnis)

For 6-year-old Fabienne Kokic, a normal life means returning to the Montreal Children's Hospital every few weeks to treat cyclic vomiting syndrome. She has already spent two Christmases hospitalized so she and her mother, Geneviève Dufresne, know how hard it is to be a patient around the holidays.

But during a pre-Christmas hospital stay, Fabienne is looking forward to the visits of Dr. Fifi-Se-Pense-Bien and Dr. L'Air de Rien.

They're clumsy and they stick their big, red noses into everything, but their white coats are stuffed with professional gadgets. Those include fishnets for Fabienne to catch the bubbles that Dr. L'Air de Rien blows, while Dr. Fifi plays recorder music. Or the pen-sized electric fan which gives Fabienne the power to blow them around the room. "Ha!" she laughs triumphantly, watching them tumble about, as though struck by gale-force winds. "They make such a difference," says her mother. "They make her laugh from the gut."

Making patients laugh and feel a sense of control is exactly what clown-doctors Melissa Holland (Fifi-Se-Pense-Bien) and Olivier-Hugues Terreault (L'Air de Rien) set out to do with their goofball doctor outfits and slapstick medicine. They are the founders of Dr. Clown!, a non-profit charitable organization that has six clown-doctors pay regular visits to the Montreal Children's Hospital, the Ste. Justine Hospital's Centre Réadaptation Marie-Enfant and CHSLD Paul Lizotte, a long-term care centre for seniors. "(Patients) have no decisions on their body, on their sickness, they have no control," Terreault said. "What we're providing is total control over us ... we're doctors who need their help."

Their brand of medical attention is particularly valuable for those in hospitals at this time of year. "It's never fun to be here around Christmas," says Ann Hébert, a child life specialist at the Montreal Children's Hospital. "The clowns can offer some sunshine, some light, some laughter." Dr. Clown! is sticking to its usual schedule during the Christmas week, spending Tuesday and today with sick children and Christmas Day with the seniors. "It is a really important time to go, because a lot of their families either can't go or they don't have families," Holland said. "The loneliness is just accentuated so much."

As therapeutic clowns, Holland and Terreault gear their act to patients' individual situations and, in the case of many seniors, try to address their feelings of uselessness



and isolation. "As clowns," Terreault said, "we're totally naive, we don't expect any particular behaviour." Since some Alzheimer's patients speak in a stream of consciousness, Holland said, "We can enter into it and go, 'Oh yeah ... me too!' "Even if what they're saying doesn't make sense, they get the sense that 'Someone's listening to me.' "

Clown-doctors meet with hospital staff to find about patients' conditions, then pull out the appropriate tricks and try to build relationships with long-term patients. "With a teenager, tired of all the pain and the procedures ... I'll try to jump out the window, and (Holland) will say, 'No don't do that,' and we'll let the kid decide," Terreault said. Paper-towel fights work for some and others get to shoot a cup off a clown's head with a spray bottle. The clown-doctors are sometimes asked to distract patients during such procedures as IV insertion. "We're not therapists, we're artists, so we go on the intuitive side," Holland said.

So far, their intuition has led them in the right direction. In 1999, Terreault started researching therapeutic-clown organizations around the world, and found there was no such program in Montreal. In the summer of 2001, he attended a therapeutic-clown workshop in Windsor, Ont., where he met Holland, who had also worked in a clown-doctor program in Scotland. The 30-year-old Montrealers decided to bring the idea home and model their own organization mostly after Le Rire Médecin, a clown-doctor program in France. Their business plan won them \$5,000 startup money from Youth Employment Services and the Fondation du Maire de Montréal pour la Jeunesse.

Now, much of their funding comes from Starlight Children's Foundation Canada, an organization whose mandate is to brighten the lives of sick children.

"Out of all of our programs (in Montreal), it's the one that gives us the biggest feedback from families," said Brian Bringolf, executive director of Starlight Children's Foundation Canada. "My goal is that someone will say 'Here's \$250,000,' " and enable Dr. Clown! to expand its services to hospitals around the city.

Terreault's goal is national. "The pain is always going to be there, the loneliness is always going to be there. ... The need is so big."