

'Moments of respite'

Clown doctors part of approach at area hospitals

BY CRYSTAL KOTOW

Administrators at Leamington District Memorial Hospital are seeing the benefits of an "alternative" medical therapy. While they strive to give patients state of the art treatment, they are willing to ask for some unconventional help.

"The 'clown doctors' add a lightness to the air," said Liz Chaplin, the hospital's chaplain, about the Fools for Health program. "With their storytelling, singing and jokes, they give patients a few moments of respite from pain and worry. That's a wonderful gift to give anyone."

The charity organization, Fools for Health, was established in 2001. Operating from Windsor Regional Hospital's western campus, it is the first program of its kind in Canada. Fools for Health sends trained clown doctors to area hospitals to perform and put smiles on patients' faces. Leamington hospital welcomed the clown doctors in August 2004. The performers visit patients, including children and adults.

"Our focus is wrought on

care, maintaining health and respecting dignity," she said. "It's very important to treat the whole person and the family in order to provide ultimate health care."

The program includes three full-time and five part-time "clown doctors," each possessing a unique personality and name. They are professionally trained actors and actresses who also complete training in "clowning," and interaction with patients.

Chaplin recalled an occasion when a clown helped a young boy relax so a nurse could set up his intravenous.

"Her name is Dr. Floretta Cauliflower," she said. "She used this rubber chicken, making it peep as she searched his arm for a vein. It took his mind off what was going on which enabled the nurse to find the vein easier due to his more relaxed state. I'm telling you, silliness goes a long way. It's fun to be silly."

Bernie Warren, director and founder of Fools for Health, has been studying the effect of drama in therapy for over 30 years. He has written books and articles on the topic and is currently a drama professor at the University of Windsor.

Warren said the introduction of clown doctors to hospitals serves to further a centuries-old belief that "you do not simply just cure disease, you heal the whole person."

"When one is lost in a moment, if you're engaged in something completely, whether it's a clown telling a joke, or watching a great piece of theatre," he said, "there is something that brings all of the various elements of what it is to be human, together."

Warren — a.k.a. Dr. Haven't-A-Clue — said there is a technique to a clown doctor's performance at a hospital. Clowns should put emphasis on the smile rather than the laugh, because "a smile lingers and is contagious and laughing is short lived."

The program also benefits hospital staff as well. Having the clowns help with patients reduces stress. Warren said when staff are relaxed they interact more with patients and families. This makes patients perceive the quality of health care to be much higher.

While Warren says laughter alone won't cure illness, he believes it greatly enhances patients' moods,



Liz Chaplin, the chaplain for Leamington District Memorial Hospital, poses in the hospital's sanctuary Aug. 14. Chaplin is supportive of the hospital's use of 'clown doctors' — professional actors who visit patients to improve their mood.

which speeds up recovery time.

"There's a lot of anecdotal evidence that says when a patient is compliant with their treatment, there is a far greater chance that the treatment will work."

Chaplin said the clowns currently work at three area hospitals including Chatham

-Kent's Health Alliance hospital and Windsor Regional Hospital. Warren said they've worked with all of them at different times in the past five years but he hopes to send performers more consistently in the future.

The Leamington Sandwich Club is hosting a luncheon featuring "clown

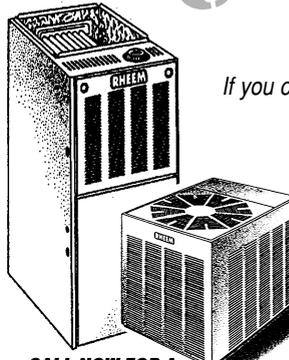
doctors," Aug. 16 at the Roma Club in Leamington. Sharron Taylor, Fools for Health administrator, will be speaking at 12:30 p.m., following a buffet lunch starting at 11:30 a.m. It's \$20 for the lunch and presentation or \$10 for just the presentation. Everyone is welcome to attend.



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