

## RED NOSES Clowndoctors International (RNI) – an introduction

*“I never would have made it if I could not have laughed. It lifted me momentarily out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it liveable.” - Viktor Frankl*

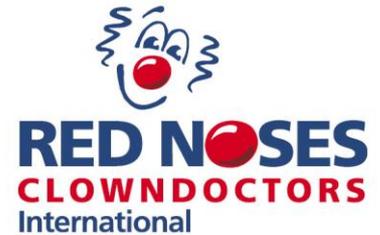
Through the ages laughter has been recognized by writers and thinkers for its positive effects on the mind and body. RED NOSES Clowndoctors was founded in 1994 in Austria as a non-profit organisation with the clear aim of bringing humour and laughter to people in need of joy, through the art of healthcare clowning. Since its inception, more and more RED NOSES partner organisations were set up in European and Middle-Eastern countries.

In 2003 the charitable non-profit foundation RED NOSES Clowndoctors International (RNI) was established. Together with RNI the 11 RED NOSES partner organisations form the RED NOSES Group, which is the largest healthcare clown group in the world. The tasks of RNI are among many others to build up, monitor and support the RED NOSES partner organisations and to develop common strategies. RNI also controls the artistic quality in the RED NOSES Group. In doing so, RED NOSES International simultaneously develops and ensures the maintenance of high ethical and artistic quality standards in all its clown programmes within the group.

### The figure of the clown

The figure of the clown deserves a few words of explanation. The clown is a very special character or even archetype. It is an important aspect to mention that a hospital clown is distinctly different from a circus clown, though sharing the same roots. The clown figure is ancient and has always been in human societies in one way or the other. The circus clown is a figure shrouded in mystique, with the face completely painted and with a non-human aspect to it, which helps to explain why many people are instinctively repelled by it. The healthcare clown on the other hand uses little makeup and is easily recognizable as just a normal person; albeit a person in funny clothes wearing a red nose and with a magical touch.

The healthcare clown is not cultivating mystique as circus clowns tend to. Instead he or she is a character easy to relate to and full of empathy and attention to the ones with which they interact. People can easily relate to and connect with the clown, a light-hearted and emotional character who constantly faces personal and emotional challenges. By cultivating the ability to almost immediately sense the atmosphere in any room they enter, the clowns grasp the mood of the children instinctively and apply a suitable energy-level to their interaction with the children. The clown visits have an important impact on the psychosocial wellbeing and the recovery process of the children. Through visits at the bedside children are empowered to return to their natural playfulness and to give them the much needed impetus for self-confidence and courage. By reversing weak aspects into strong ones, hospital clowning offers essential tools to aid in problem solving, acceptance and adaptation – all vital elements needed to empower people, children



especially, and help them manage better navigate the circumstances they are in. The clown figure constantly deals successfully with failures and turns them into personal victories, in this way inspiring people facing hardships.

### **Healthcare clowning and psychosocial support**

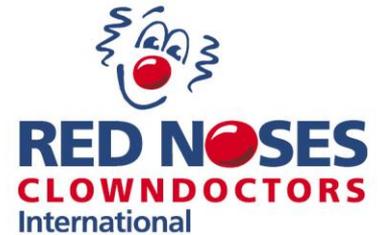
Healthcare clowning is an artistic, and thus different, approach to traditional efforts within Mental Health and Psycho Social Support (MHPSS). It is an approach that has proved its effectiveness and worth over the years, as more and more scientific studies show, and to which the constant growth in professional healthcare clown organisations throughout the world underlines. This integration of humour has been continuous and gradual for the past many years across most of the Western European countries and, notably, beyond. Clown visits aim to increase children's emotional well-being and resilience through humour, playfulness, and creativity.

By now, a substantial body of research shows that healthcare clowns reduce the anxiety of hospitalized children and their families. In the long term, clowns create a lasting change to the hospital environment. For example, a recent survey of medical staff in Palestine visited by RED NOSES shows that clown visits make them aware of specific strategies to show empathy to children. This kind of feedback from medical staff suggests that clown visits help to transform hospitals into spaces that no longer undermine, but rather support children's confidence, interpersonal engagement, and emotional well-being.

### **The work of RED NOSES**

The RED NOSES Group has developed a wide range of specific formats within its programmes for all major beneficiaries: sick children, senior patients, multiple disabled children and rehabilitation patients, as well as people in vulnerable situations. The overall mission of the RED NOSES Group has essentially remained the same over the years, namely to bring humour and laughter to people in need of joy. A red thread for RNI is the focus on humour and laughter as a coping mechanism and as actual stress relief: for the children, their families and the medical staff. Healthcare clowns practice a sensitive, empathetic style of interaction that counteracts the often depersonalizing aspects of modern medical care. Meanwhile, the clowns automatically adopt a low-status role when interacting with children which in turn allows for the children to take on a position of authority vis-à-vis the clown, and thereby regain a feeling of control over their situation.

RNI has developed and maintained high artistic quality standards and is constantly investing in the training of all artists of the RED NOSES Group, which translates to more than 470 healthcare clowns. By using international teachers external to the group, through constant international trainings and local coaching, as well as the implementation of a mandatory curriculum for the clowns, the RED NOSES Group strives to provide the best training and education possible to ensure the highest artistic quality possible. The RNI curriculum is obligatory for all RED NOSES clowns and comprises a total of 480 hours. It ranges from artistic and healthcare studies, to clinical exposure, psychosocial studies, sociology and communication. It includes practical experience in the hospital, as well as the commitment to attend regular supervisions. Most of the trainings are held at the International School of Humour (ISH) in Vienna, next to the RNI headquarters.



In recent years, as hospital clowning has grown to be increasingly respected by medical staff and viewed as a holistic part of the hospital experience as well as the healing process itself, new programs have been developed to integrate the clowning into the actual medical procedures, helping to reduce stress significantly at identified moments of heightened stress and anxiety. In RED NOSES we call these programs *intensive smile*.

### The work in oncology wards

As of 2020, RED NOSES is active in oncological wards in 40 different hospitals and clinics throughout the RED NOSES Group. Children in paediatric oncology wards routinely experience long stays in hospitals and therefore the work with children in paediatric oncology wards has always been central to the mission of RED NOSES. We have built up a lot of knowledge and tools to bring psycho-social support to the children – and their families – going through the hard and often painful treatments.

Working with children in oncology wards is different in important ways compared to the regular work of healthcare clowns. In general, the clowns need to have as much information as they can, concerning the little patients. When a child has cancer, he or she is not alone in the suffering: the rest of the family is affected too, in various direct and indirect ways. A child with cancer puts immense stress on a family, and often divorces are the result, regardless of the outcome with the ill child. Working with gravely ill children therefore requires the highest level of empathy from the clowns. RED NOSES clowns always strive to engage with the whole family, when possible. The clowns aim to interact with the siblings and parents of the patient, to help to bring the family closer. The clowns try to lighten up the atmosphere and connect them all through humour and games. In order to do this, the clowns need to be acutely sensitive to the situation and pay attention to every detail. The clowns must respect everyone in the family, while also trying to include them.

It is also important for the clowns not to treat the severely ill too differently due to the cancer, as they also have a wish to play. This again requires empathy and sensitivity to get just right. Sometimes it can also be important that the children do not get too excited, that they do not laugh too much, if for example they are going through a particularly painful part of chemotherapy. In this case, light and gentle humour is needed.

As the children are more often than not in the hospital for long term treatments, this also represents a unique possibility for the clowns to engage more deeply with the children than otherwise. The clowns learn about the special interests of the children and incorporate this into their clowning. In this way, the clowning becomes more tailored to the individual children and what they like. As the children often have favourite clowns, the clowns try to make the children spend as much time as they can with the clown they like best. The long term aspect also allows for a different 'dramaturgy' than a normal visit, as the clowns can teach the children tricks and skills that the children can then use over time, practising and demonstrating their new skills to family, staff and clowns.

In general, the clowns try to celebrate the children as much as they can. Later in the treatment, the clowns often meet the children when they no longer need to stay in the hospital, or even years later when they come back for check-ups. This is always an emotional experience for everyone, a celebration of life. In this way, hospital clowns stand out as a positive memory later on in the lives of the children.



Of course, there is also the opposite end of the spectrum, where the children succumb to the cancer. Even in these times, the clowns let the families include them in their grief if the families wish for this, sharing their emotional experiences within the clown team and working through the emotional pain in this way.

### **Humour workshops for staff**

RNI is using an integrated and sustainable approach that not only focuses on children, but also seeks to support medical staff in their daily work with tailor-made workshops. Humour has the potential to create a powerful emotional connection between people, enhancing and stimulating social interactions, and in fostering a better working environment. By sharing knowledge on how humour can be of help, healthcare staff can find new ways of connecting with their beneficiaries, especially in stressful and tense situations. On the one hand this extends the impact of the RED NOSES work for the beneficiaries, on the other hand the medical personnel can use the newly-acquired tools to improve their own psychosocial well-being and resilience in the face of a very stressful and burdening work environment. The humour workshops are offered to medical staff in most of the RED NOSES partner organisations.

### **Looking to the future**

Through its membership of UICC, RNI is thrilled to be part of such an important and significant network. RNI wants to make its own voice heard. To share our unique experiences and insights from working within paediatric oncology from a very different perspective than the traditional medical one. We also look forward to interact and communicate with a plethora of important players, especially within paediatric cancer, discussing what healthcare clowning brings to the table as a different and unique MHPSS-approach, while learning about the latest developments in the medical field.

It is our hope in RNI that we can contribute with new perspectives and help to broaden the discussion when it comes to MHPSS for cancer patients, especially children, and the important role that humour can play in the healthcare field. Perhaps we can find new partners that are interested in exploring possibilities for future cooperation, to the mutual benefit of all. It could also be that RNI could arrange humour workshops for interested UICC members, using the expertise of RNI to contribute to the UICC community as well. For RNI, the UICC is the ideal forum to open up these ideas and discussions and develop new ideas as a result.

#### **Monica Culen**

CEO

RED NOSES Clowndoctors International

T: +43 1 318 03 13 – 11

#### **Frederik Bruun Birnbaum**

International Programme Leader

RED NOSES Clowndoctors International

T: +43 660 244 9899