

ID

IN-DEPTH

CHILDREN'S  
HEALTH

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## Making Hospitals Fun

A comfortable, creative hospital environment isn't just nice to have—for the youngest patients, it can be the key to healing, inside and out. **BY KEVIN FEATHERLY**

**T**he video has a familiar feel. The camera is angled from a bed-ridden patient's point of view, but it's not immediately evident what is happening. The gurney wheels down the hallway as the camera pans. You hear the ambient buzz of hospital activity. A worried woman—the patient's mother—consoles the patient, a 9-year-old girl. Finally, the point becomes clear—the patient is being wheeled to a holding room before going

into the operating room for major surgery.

The child who filmed that movie was operated on at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in San Francisco, which opened in February. The video was made with the assistance of a child life specialist at the hospital, according to Michael Towne, Benioff's child life services manager. The child shot and edited the video with an iPad, and while it is just 90 seconds long, Towne says, it packs an emotional wallop.



Everyone knows it is significant. But there is not enough being done to actually put it into practice.”

### SOPHISTICATED WHIMSY

Still, examples exist in which fun and growth are key parts of therapeutic practice and childlike sensory experiences are integrated to help kids emerge from medical crises stronger and ready to face the world.

Rady Children's Hospital—San Diego is unusual in its commitment to arts programming. Many hospitals recruit volunteer artists and storytellers to conduct arts workshops or read books. Rady Children's has nine per-diem staffers dedicated to arts programming.

Among them is the storyteller team of James Nelson-Lucas and Patti Christensen. “Patti sort of tells the stories and James is very silly and acts them out,” says Bob Davis, Rady's healing arts program coordinator.

Davis once accompanied the duo around a unit when they came upon a little girl crying in her bed, in obvious pain and distress.

“Our storytellers have been doing this for a long time so they know how to approach kids and families,” Davis says. Gingerly, patiently, they started their story, gradually coaxing the girl to share her own stories, which they then incorporated into their routine. Gradually, the little girl forgot her distress and began to smile.

“By the time they left a half-hour later this little girl was laughing and having a great time—no longer in the pain she was in when we first walked into the room,” Davis says.

Martha A. Askins is a co-founder of the Arts in Medicine Program at the MD Anderson Children's Cancer Hospital in Houston, where she also is the center's Adolescent and Young Adult Program psychosocial director. Askins recently launched a trial to determine whether art can help adolescent and young adult patients cope with advanced or relapsed cancer treatment. Her results will feed into a larger multi-institutional trial and provide data for the National Institutes of Health, which is considering funding for further arts-in-medicine clinical trials.

Anecdotally, at least, Askins needs no convincing. She describes a 6-year-old girl who recently endured a major brain surgery. Doctors urged the girl to get out of bed and move around to avoid inactivity-related complications, but she was nervous and afraid, Askins recounts. Initially, the young patient refused.

As it happens, the girl loves making art, so when she was invited to get up and walk to the hospital's “Pedi Dome” activity room where an art project was underway, her resistance lifted. She walked to the room, sat down and began to participate.

“She stayed for over an hour,” Askins says. She eventually tired, but she went back to her room with a healthy new sense of accomplishment. “I think it was a step for her toward getting back to normal and toward finding out that she is going to be OK after such a big surgery.”

Art and play time are not the only environmental factors key to helping kids deal with medical challenges, the NHS survey notes. Natural lighting, nature-themed artwork and exposure to gardens, sky and trees also are important aids to healing.

Benioff Children's units include room-sized “air gardens” where patients can quickly step outside for fresh air without having to go all the way to the lobby. Every patient room has a window that offers a view of green space, the San Francisco Bay or specially designed rooftop gardens. “There are lots of subtle design features that I think have enormous implications,” UCSF's Towne says. “I think it really allows for a connection to nature.”

At Children's Hospital & Medical Center in Omaha, numerous kid-friendly activities are included in kids' regular care. The institution stages bingo tournaments, movie nights, book fairs and hosts special visitors—including, this summer, College World Series baseball players. Its pet therapy program is so popular that it issues trading cards with dogs' pictures and life stories printed on them. Kids eagerly collect and paste them to their walls.

“The reaction of the children to the dogs is absolutely amazing,” says Cherie Lytle,

Patti  
+  
James



the hospital's patient experience manager. "The dog will come in for a visit and the child will smile—that might be the first smile the nurses or the parents have seen in a week."

As in a number of other institutions, Children's in Omaha has taken pains to design spaces in kid-friendly ways. There is utility behind those choices. For example, a child placed in an MRI machine needs to lie very still. At Children's in Omaha, the radiology room is decorated with cool, calming underwater-themed murals and decals that help alleviate stress. That can reduce the need for multiple scans and lower radiation exposure. By remaining calm and still, children also might need no sedation—an obvious health benefit.

The water themes spill out into the halls, where huge aquariums hold exotic saltwater fish, including clown fish and regal tangs—the species featured in the popular Disney movie *Finding Nemo*.

Lytle agrees that incorporating art, play and nature into the hospital environment is not just aesthetically pleasing and fun—it has enormous therapeutic benefits.

"When we are able to make the setting warmer and help bring comfort and instill trust and confidence, the patient's outcome is going to be better," she says. "The part of the outcome that we can control is going to be better."

#### **AN EXPANDING TREND?**

MD Anderson's Askins is among those who agree with NHS' Tonkin in insisting that therapeutic settings could—and should—be more widely distributed, not only at the children's hospitals and academic medical centers, but in midsized hospitals, even outpatient clinics.

Kelly is optimistic. "I think we are going to see a much bigger trend," she says. "And I think it will swing toward outpatient services." That will be an important development, she says, because most people have their initial contact

with health care providers in outpatient settings.

"Those are the experiences that [can] make you afraid for the rest of your life," Kelly says. "So if we can intervene from that very first moment, we can teach kids from a young age to deal with challenging experiences."

The impact of that, she says, is

almost incalculable. "Quite honestly," Kelly says, "the skills that we are teaching these kids cross all borders of their lives. It's going to allow them to face other challenges, like if your parents get divorced or if you get older and lose a job. Those can be things that you have learned to deal with through a positive early experience." ▼