

Laughter for health's sake at Stony Brook University medical school

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Michael Christensen, a clown who was a founder of the Big Apple Circus, entertains a child while at New York Hospital, circa 1990. Christensen plans to visit Stony Brook University School of Medicine on Thursday as part of workshops and a lecture on medical clowning. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Michael Christensen

Experts who study laughter as good medicine will deliver a lecture on the [health benefits](#) of clowns in health care Thursday at Stony Brook University School of Medicine, where they will emphasize the shortage of funny-faced humorists in American health care.

Medical clowns, as they are known, are more common in Israel and Europe than in the United States even though the field began in this country four decades ago, said Michael Christensen, who considers himself the father of medical clowning.

He wears a bowler hat and bulbous nose, mimicking Weary Willie, the classic hobo clown made famous in the 1940s.

“We specialize in funny bones,” said Christensen, who also wears a white lab coat and a stethoscope.

Christensen, who is American, said he and his colleagues abroad would like to see U.S. hospitals add clowns to their staffs, humorists who would be part of the medical team. Roles are expanding beyond pediatrics, he said, with some European centers using clowns in the care of [dementia](#) patients.



Atay Citron, a visiting lecturer at Stony Brook University School of Medicine, is holding a session there Thursday on the benefits of clowns in medical settings. Citron, who holds a doctorate in performance studies, is from University of Haifa in Israel. He is shown on Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2017. Photo Credit: Rande Daddona

Overall, the field now has research-oriented journals and annual meetings, much like the parallel universe of medicine and medical research.

“Humor is important when people don’t feel well,” Christensen said, noting that small children are easier to work with than those in their teens. “If you’re a teenager in bed, you really don’t want to see a clown show up at your door. Teenagers respect skill and they’re not easily fooled, but a really good clown who is also a magician can hook a teenager very quickly.”

Medical clowning as a [therapeutic](#) method has become a part of treatment in some East Coast hospitals, including Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan and on Long Island, Yale-New Haven Children’s Hospital in Connecticut and The Johns-Hopkins Hospitals in Maryland.

Christensen, who founded the Big Apple Circus in Manhattan 40 years ago, will serve as a sidekick during Stony Brook’s grand rounds on Thursday, accompanying Israeli scholar Atay Citron, who will lecture on performance theory and research under way in medical clowning.

A grand rounds lecture is one of medicine’s most respected teaching rituals and routinely draws an institution’s [doctors](#), nurses and medical students to a large auditorium. Usually, those lectures feature arcane topics — robotic surgery, stem cell research or advances in beating back the scourges of drug-resistant bacteria.

Citron said medical clowning is a serious academic endeavor deserving of respect. Medical clowns in Israel are required to have a master’s degree, he said, and one clown at his institution, University of Haifa in Israel, has earned a doctorate.

At Haifa, medical clowns also are required to study psychology to better understand human behavior and how humor helps patients in stressful situations, such as invasive medical tests or surgery.

Outside of medical clowning, studies consistently have shown how laughter produces beta-endorphins. These neurochemicals are well-known pain suppressors.

“Yes, clowns have routines and little props. But the main thing in medical clowning is the interactive nature of the encounter,” said Citron, who is teaching at Stony Brook through December. He is sponsored by the Schusterman Visiting Israeli Artists Program.

Dr. Stephen Post, founding director of Stony Brook’s Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics, said clowns and laughter are keys in the contagious spread of happiness and kindness, which can help ailing people feel better.

“Trying to be a little kinder should be the motto of every hospital on Long Island and across the United States,” Post said. “Everybody knows what that is. A part of kindness is taking off the rough edges, showing a little smile, a little warmth and a little mirth.”

Some American clowns who have not been part of the academic side of performing find the new research emphasis surprising.

Michael Kaplan — by profession a public relations consultant for Northwell Health, and also a clown whose venues span everything from hospitals to birthday parties — said he doesn’t know of any clowns who would read a scientific journal.

“Peer-reviewed journals for medical clowns? That’s bizarre,” said Kaplan, who has worked under the name Gandolf the Wizard Clown since 1974. While inspiring happiness is important, he said, the fear of clowns is something that must be taken seriously.

“The term is coulrophobia,” Kaplan said, and some children find exaggerated clown makeup and fright wigs scary. He said he minimized his own makeup years ago to avoid evoking both fear and arrest. Police once thought Kaplan was a bandit because of his clown makeup.

Before Thursday’s lecture, Citron and Christensen will lead workshops on medical clowning at the university’s Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics. The workshops are open only to Stony Brook medical staff.

The ground rounds lecture, open to the staff and the public, will be held at 4:30 p.m. Thursday in Lecture Hall Four of the Health Sciences Tower at 101 Nicolls Rd.