

Pod in 2020

The Year in Retrospect

2020 was to be another year of making thousands of smiles, with 2880 shows scheduled in 130 hospitals and hospices. We'd received much of the funding for the year ahead from our generous loyal donors and Pod entertainers were going to be busy making smiles. By mid-March there had been 556 Pod visits and we'd received lots of photos of smiling children and nice comments.



My son had an operation today and when the magician came on the ward, my son's face was a picture. It cheered him up at the perfect time as he was getting anxious and upset. Thank you so much for making the children smile at a time of anxiety and often distress - fantastic!

(Father, Countess of Chester Hospital)

Today was the first time I have heard him laugh since he became ill. It was such a lovely sound. Barrington's visit has made the world of difference for Taylor.

(Mother, Blackpool Hospital)



Magic Russ was the best - please bring him back every day!

(Kobee - on his Hospital Feedback Form)



Imogen loves seeing Graeme - it makes her visits to hospital that little bit more bearable.

(Mother Great North Children's Hospital)

Olivia has been in traction since the 12th of December - and our Pod visits make children happy and relaxed.

(Play Specialist, Russell Hall Hospital, Dudley)



Hospital visits can be very distressful for children and their families and Julie's visits always have a positive impact creating a happy and enjoyable atmosphere. It makes the visit more pleasant and full of fun which helps create happy memories for them. Children always look forward to seeing her during their visit and enquire about her next visit.

(Sister, Ealing Hospital).



Shahera's mother, Amina, sent some pictures of her daughter who is waiting for a stem cell transplant. Ine Twist says, "I've seen Shahera about five times now and she always starts to smile as soon as she sees me because she knows I'll make something special."

(St George's Hospital Tooting)



Some entertainers had already raised funding. Julie Carpenter had successfully arranged for funding of 20 monthly visits at Watford Hospital from donations made to Mr Dave Edwards' Christmas House Illuminations which would in the words of a mother, "shine a bit of light on a hospital stay for children," at Watford Hospital. Ine Dries (pictured right) had already done three monthly collections at three London railway stations raising £1059.78 plus a donation of £1000 subsequently received from a very generous commuter to fund 20 monthly visits at Chelmsford Hospital.



But for the first time in over 42 years Pod visits came to an abrupt halt in March when due to the coronavirus pandemic all visits were suspended mid- March. Everyone missed Pod's visits and some entertainers responded by providing YouTube videos and Zoom videos for their hospitals but Pod wasn't involved with this. Pod decided against experimenting with virtual visits because of the difficulty in overseeing what was being provided and to whom. A few hospitals are currently overseeing virtual visits (with their donor's agreement) over the Christmas period.

By September, several hospitals were indicating that they hoped to resume visits. There had been plenty of time in the intervening months to prepare for the return, risk assessments had been made and many new safety measures were adopted, ensuring that there was maximum protection for everyone. The Pod Smile Resuscitation Kit invented earlier in the year by entertainer Dov Citron (Captain Calamity) was very much needed.

I was in the lift heading up to Rainbow Ward and a young doctor asked me if my yellow case was a Heart Resuscitation Kit. I unzipped my coat revealing my Captain Calamity outfit and said the case in fact contained a Smile Resuscitation Kit. Well that stuck with me so before long I had a new bit of signage for my magic show case and now when I see the children it's the first thing they notice when I wheel it in to the wards and it generates smiles before it's even opened.



And the good news is Pod provided a visit at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Woolwich and two visits at Lister Hospital Stevenage in October and one visit at Edinburgh Children's Hospital in November. Whilst the majority of hospitals thought it unlikely that visits would resume

before January 2021 at the very earliest, these hospitals had decided that the benefits children would derive from a Pod visit far outweighed any risk involved. So Pod is back in business, albeit on a very limited scale. Feedback received shows how much Pod has been missed. The smiles are the same - there just aren't so many of them.

*The ward has been deflated since the lockdown and although I am trying to get play back on track, there are obviously many new regulations that mean children are not as free to play as they were. I think I have forgotten that life has not been normal for our patients or their parents because it would be difficult to say who enjoyed the show the most. What I can say was that from this small group the laughter and applause was so loud that doctors joined us to see what the fun was about. It isn't news to you that I look forward to Gordon's visits **but this one was so special as it brought joy and normality to the ward that we have been lacking.***



(Play Specialist, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woolwich
Tuesday October 6th)

It was wonderful to have Captain Calamity back with us on Bluebell Ward. He saw many children on the ward - social distancing of course was adhered to, along with sanitising after each child. It was great to hear the laughter from the children and parents too. One dad told me after Dov left that seeing him was the highlight of the hospital admission. We have all really missed Pod. When Dov and Andy visit it brings such joy and really cheers everyone up. We can't wait for our next Pod visit.

(Play Specialist, Lister Hospital, Stevenage Thursday October 15th)



Dov was amazing yesterday. It was lovely to have him back. Hattie and her mum are still talking about his visit today. It really cheered them both up.

(Play Specialist, Lister Hospital,
Stevenage)

Dov came for his visit today and Jo and I were very excited to have him. I must admit I sent him a text half an hour before he arrived, asking how long he would be - Jo and I felt like we were waiting for Santa to arrive. It also gave us a chance to reflect on how the past few months had been for us all and how we all miss normality. As soon as Dov



arrived Jo and I both opened the playroom door (currently used as a storeroom as children can't mix) and we cheered, seeing Dov run up to us was fantastic - just a shame the hug was an air hug. Our staff were just as excited to see Dov in the department and we can't wait to have Andy back too. It will be amazing to have our family back in one place again. **The sound of laughter rippled through our ward, it's the best infectious thing we have in our department.** (Play Specialist Lister Hospital Stevenage October 22nd)

Unfortunately lockdown meant November's visits at Stevenage and Woolwich were cancelled and December visits are unlikely. But we are expecting another visit at Edinburgh Children's Hospital in December following November's highly successful visit.

A big thank you to our donors for your support and we look forward to spending the funding we've received from you in making lots of smiles in 2021. This update ends with a thank you from entertainer Barrington Powell.

I know that the real magic is not provided by me but by the wonderful sponsors who make it happen. The gift that you provide is special and how can I begin to explain it to you? It may simply be in a knowing glance from a parent towards their child, the sound of laughter rippling down a corridor or the sight of a child who joyfully comes up to me, like a long lost friend. The guffaw of a parent laughing, a child giggling their socks off and for a fleeting moment forgetting their painful procedure and their problems and there is hope and a moment of respite. I am often told by parents that a child looks forward to coming in to hospital to see if I will be in today and for a moment they can forget why they are here and the hospital is transformed into a happy place. An uncontrollable giggle is unleashed as a balloon flies from my fingertips or as I stretch an elongated modelling balloon only to twang it into my nose which conjurs up the right amount of revelry. In equal measure is that rather special eye roll from a teenager which can be more rewarding because in a moment of tomfoolery and for a split second they too have been amazed by a card trick and have suddenly entered this world of magical make believe. Is it hard work? Too right it is and that is what makes it most rewarding. I have been fortunate enough to train and be part of the hospital environment for over 20 years and have seen how paediatric care has changed. Pod has been there from those early days and has transformed the environment by providing those smiles.