

Wednesday, 15 May 2013

Margaret Munford
Mount Hall, Llanfair Caereinion
Welshpool, Wales SY21 0BH

Dear Margaret

The POD visits have the potential to help our young patients on many levels and the meaning and benefits depends on the context of the child's visit to the hospital. Some of the most deprived children are not the sickest, but those who have long term chronic diseases or disabilities, who have long periods off school, very disrupted social lives and repeated admissions to hospital. They miss out on their friend's parties, the end of term treats at school as well as regular schooling and family life. For them the POD entertainers and magicians give them a chance to experience something that other children may take for granted, the joy and wonder of a magic show. I think this is an essential experience of childhood!

For other children and their families who are frequently with them in hospital, a POD show provides a welcome respite from the reality of the hospital environment and awareness of the illness, the drips and the drains and the absence of all that is familiar. Any play activity has the potential to do this but the POD shows have a magic of their own in transporting children to another world. Their faces are transformed by joy and wonder as they forget their environment and become totally absorbed in all the fun of the show.

Children don't make friends easily in hospital. Their energy is devoted to coping with the stresses and strains of the hospital encounter, the novelty of each experience, each person they meet and the pain or anxiety they may be feeling. Shared experiences through something like the POD show create a meeting point when friendships can begin to form through laughter and silliness and all are united temporarily in telling the magician he's got it wrong only to realise some magic has happened. For newly admitted patients, like those awaiting surgery, coming to join the audience watch a POD show creates a fast track into the friendship group.

Having worked as a play specialist for many years, I have heard countless children happily talk of the day they saw the magician in the hospital and will often recall in great detail some part of the experience especially if they got a chance to "help" the magician. Isn't it just wonderful that they have these memories of a hospital stay at such an impressionable stage? Anything we can do to increase a healthy attitude to hospital experiences will contribute to reduced anxiety in the years to come.

While no research has been done to evaluate the direct impact of laughter on health after such a short term encounter, we do know that laughter reduces blood cortisol levels generally and that this lowers the risk of infection and other complications, so I hope that an hours' POD show has a positive physiological response. However I feel certain that all I have described above is contributing to children's mental health

When POD magicians first came to The Middlesex Hospital way back in the eighties I welcomed them warmly for my own sake sometimes as well as the children's. While the hospital play service at this hospital has been transformed beyond all recognition, not all hospitals in the UK have been as fortunate as we have, so I know that for many play specialists, there will be that same response. As lone practitioners, with sole responsibility for the "entertainment" and play needs of a ward anything up to 30 children, the hour long visit of a POD magician gives these staff a moment or two to sit with the children without having to be in charge of them.

I have no problems recommending POD as a worthwhile charity, because I believe totally in the value of what you do. Having worked with several charities and voluntary groups, I also know that I am recommending a charity that operates within the terms I believe a charity should. While others often make work for hospital staff, with requirements for publicity, demands for our time for administration or create concern by the staff behaviour, POD make it easy for us to work with them and they do all they can to simplify the process.

I have a rather faded photograph at home which is very precious to me. It shows a 14 year old boy called Robert throwing his head back in howls of laughter as he sat with a group of younger children watching the POD magician. I can't recall the reason for the laughter and nor can I see the magician in the picture, but Robert, who had leukaemia died a few weeks later and it is good to know that POD contributed to his short life in such a significant way.

Yours sincerely

Judy Walker
Former UCLH Play Services Manager