

Exploring the Role of Emotional Support in Healthcare

Healthcare is often associated with medicine, treatment, and physical recovery only. However, Non governmental organisations such as Dr Klown focus on another side of patient care: emotional support through communication, interaction, and clown therapy.

Founded in 2011, Dr Klown NGO works within hospitals and healthcare environments across Malta. During an interview, Vice President Corinne Wood explained that the organisation currently consists of around 40 active clown doctors and another 20 volunteers supporting the organisation behind the scenes.

Although clown doctors are often associated with humour and entertainment, Wood explained that the role goes beyond simply making patients laugh.

“It’s not only laughter or a smile that we are concentrating on. It’s distraction and empowerment of the child,” she said.

According to Wood, children in hospitals can often lose control over their environment as adults, doctors, nurses, and guardians make decisions around them. Through improvisation and interaction, clown doctors attempt to involve children directly within the experience and create a more comforting atmosphere.

Although clown doctors are not certified medical doctors, they undergo approximately one year of artistic and psychological training involving communication, empathy, improvisation, and emotional preparation before entering healthcare environments. Corinne Wood explained that emotional support within healthcare is not always straightforward, as younger children may initially fear clown doctors while teenagers can sometimes appear uninterested or disconnected. Because of this, volunteers are trained to adapt their communication and interaction depending on each patient’s response and situation.

The emotional impact of the role can also affect the volunteers themselves. Wood explained that clown doctors attend psychological peer sessions with professionals to discuss difficult experiences encountered on the wards.

One aspect that stood out during the interview was the individuality of each clown doctor. Every volunteer creates their own identity and clown name during training. Wood herself performed under the name “Dr Gimme Five,” using playful interaction as a way to connect with patients.

When asked whether emotional support should play a larger role within healthcare systems, Wood responded: “Absolutely. I think we can never have enough of it.”

Dr Klown continues to explain that the organization would like to expand their work within healthcare environments, including projects involving children with autism and hopes of extending support services towards dementia patients in the future.