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Clowning and Play Help Patients Heal According to Interview in *American Journal of Play*

Clowning and play in a clinical setting can contribute to healing and good health according to Bowen White, MD, a medical doctor trained in clowning by the renowned physician/activist Patch Adams (portrayed in a Hollywood movie by actor Robin Williams). In a recent interview appearing in the Summer issue of the *American Journal of Play* (a scholarly journal from Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York), White, who founded the Department of Preventive and Stress Medicine at the Baptist Medical Center in Kansas City, recounts how clowning and play have altered his professional and personal approach to life.

White's clown persona, Dr. Jerko, was born in 1991 when Patch Adams invited White to accompany a group of clowns to Russia where they would clown in hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged, schools for the handicapped, and other places to bring joy into people's lives. On his way home from the trip, White was scheduled to do grand rounds and give a talk for the adolescent medicine department at Beth Israel Hospital in New York City. He decided to do both in clown costume! The positive and enthusiastic reception from patients and colleagues alike resulted in an important "Ah ha!" moment for White about the power of clowning and playfulness on the job.

Clowning also has a residual effect on his psyche, says White, spilling over into his professional relationships. "We've all been acculturated to devalue play and fun or to relegate it to some later, after-work timeframe," he says. "We have a bivalent all-or-nothing, this-or-that perspective. . . . Workers who have fun working together do better work than those who don't." And Nobel Prize winners often see their work as play: "They play with problems that engage them and time flies because they're having fun. 'Whoops, missed lunch again!'"

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How does all this levity fit in amidst the gravity of medical practice? To illustrate, White recounts a pivotal experience with Graham, a third-grade boy with a brain tumor who was receiving serious post-op chemotherapy and radiation. Bored with waiting for his appointment, Graham put on a toy pig nose and, when the doctor walked in, he turned around, pointed to the pig nose and said, “Well Doc, there were certain side effects from the radiation you forgot to tell me about!” Here was a life lesson from a young child who “found a light, buoyant, and playful quality of energy that allowed him to stay emotionally balanced at a very stressful time in his life.”

In scientific terms, White points to evidence that playfulness can change the body’s chemistry. “Every white blood cell in the body has receptor sites for every neurotransmitter we produce. When we are playful and enjoying ourselves, we are producing cortical and limbic brain activity that reflects the play state. The neurotransmitters we produce would be markedly different from those of someone who was depressed and play deprived. We feel positive when we are playful, and those thoughts or feelings create neurotransmitters as the mechanical messengers of our psycho-physiological state.”

Although the research in the field of psychoneuroimmunology is still new and much is anecdotal, says White, “we do know that chronically depressed folks and those who are situationally depressed over the loss of significant others have decreased white cell function. So we know something about the negative impact of the depressed psychological state. The other side of the coin, the play state, is only just beginning to be scientifically explored. My bias is clear; not playing enough is bad for your health.”

Concludes White, “Medicine has not taught me to be a better clown. Rather, the reverse is true. Clowning has taught me to be a better doctor. By playing around as a clown, I’ve made a systemic shift, and I think I’m a better person now, regardless of which role I’m in.”

Bowen White, MD founded the Department of Preventive and Stress Medicine at the Baptist Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1983 and later established the center’s Department of Wellness and Health Promotion. He travels the world conducting seminars, consulting, and speaking to public and private organizations. He is the author of *Why Normal Isn’t Healthy: How to Find Heart, Meaning, Passion, and Humor on the Road Most Traveled* and has lectured and clowned across the globe, in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, homes for the aged, hospices, schools, refugee camps, prisons, and more.

About the *American Journal of Play* (a publication of Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York): Peer-reviewed and written in a clear, straightforward style, the *American Journal of Play* is the first interdisciplinary journal dedicated solely to the study of play. Providing thought-provoking content from some of the most prominent national researchers and writers in the field, each issue is filled with articles, essays interviews, and book reviews that explore the critical role of play in learning and human development. To view the most current issue’s table of contents, visit: www.americanjournalofplay.org

About Strong National Museum of Play: Home to the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, Strong National Museum of Play houses the world’s most comprehensive collection of dolls, toys, games, and play-related artifacts and is the only collections-based museum anywhere devoted solely to the critical role of play in learning and human development and the ways in which play illuminates American cultural history. The museum is also home to the National Toy Hall of Fame®, the National Center for the History of Electronic Games™, and dynamic, innovative exhibitions combining artifacts and interactivity. For more information, visit www.museumofplay.org.