HUMOR IN MEDICINE

SPEECH FOR

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Hello ladies and gentlemen. We all know that laughter is the best medicine, but I once saw a cartoon showing two doctors deep in conversation. The caption read, “According to my research, laughter is the best medicine, however, giggling is good for mild infections, chuckling works for minor cuts and bruises, and-be forewarned… snickering only makes things worse.” (**Wait for the laugh**). In this bogged down, overscheduled, stressed out world we live in, laughter **is** the best medicine, and concurrent to that, today we’re going to explore the subject of humor in medicine. The actual benefits of laughter in medical situations may not yet be quantified, but there are positives we know for sure-no side effects, the price is right, one doesn’t need a prescription, and anyone can participate in the joke sharing, either as the **teller** or the “**tellee**” and everyone has the capacity appreciate the sense of release and camaraderie that is fostered and experienced at the end of a good belly laugh.

In recent years, therapeutic humor conferences have been gaining in popularity. In an article on the website [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com), entitled, “At Therapeutic Humor Conference, Laughter in Medicine is Serious Business,” we discover some interesting information. It states, “’Scientific support might be coming, however.’ This was the takeaway from a keynote session helmed by Willibald Ruch, a professor at the University of Zurich who’s one of the titans of humor psychology. Lately, Ruch and his researchers have turned their scientific gaze on humor therapy, and so far, the results have been encouraging. In one study, they tracked multiple groups of people, some who attended laughter clubs and learned humor-therapy skills. Over an extended period of time, those exposed to humor therapy reported markedly increased satisfaction with life compared to those who didn’t.” Later on in the same piece, we learn, “Laughter yogis have to stop bickering with laughter therapists; folks have to stop arguing over whether it’s humor or laughter or comedy or clowns that are the secret to medicinal merrymaking. After all … all these approaches lead to the same place: Helping people learn how to generate humor and laughter when times are good, so when things go bad, they will have the tools at their disposal to lift themselves to a happier, healthier place. Steve Wilson, known as the ‘**Cheerman** of the Board,’ knows this from personal experience. About a year and a half ago, he was rushed to the hospital from one of his humor workshops with terrible back pain. Part of his intestine had exploded, nearly killing him, and in the medical chaos that followed, he was ravaged by pneumonia, kidney failure, a blood clot in his lung and surgical wounds that wouldn’t heal. Wilson was so miserable that he didn’t laugh at the rubber chicken someone had hung from his IV pole. When a hospital clown came by to cheer him up, Wilson sent her away. ‘It was like being in a black box,’ he said. ‘How do I get out?’ Several weeks later, he found an exit. Lying on a stretcher after a particularly grueling CAT scan, a nurse leaned over him and asked, ‘Are you comfortable?’ At that moment, a joke came to Wilson, one he’d heard years earlier. ‘I make a living.’ he cracked, giggling.” Humor saved the day. Sometimes we all can feel like the light at the end of the tunnel has been burned out. We are now acknowledging that a little laughter can spark the generator that turns that light, and **life**, back on.

I had heard of a case about a woman, certainly one we would hope to consider too young to have a heart attack, but there she was, at 50 years and 3 months, after having experienced alarming symptoms and being smart enough to get herself to the hospital emergency room, lying on an operating room table with a very capable, and fortunately very funny, cardiac catheter team staring down at her. The woman’s most vivid memory of that life threatening experience? I heard her say, “All I remember was that we laughed and laughed and laughed! They pulled my artery in my groin? We laughed. They shot the dye through me during the angiogram? More laughs. It felt weird and I begged for morphine-I don’t even drink or do drugs…**THAT** inspired more wise cracks! The head of the team was the funniest one! (Ladies and Gentlemen, please do not lose sight of the fact that this man was the head of the cardiac catheter team at a major teaching hospital in New York). The atmosphere in that OR was amazing! Maybe it was the drugs; maybe they really **WERE** funny, and maybe they were just so happy that I wasn’t about to die and they knew they could save me. Maybe I really **do** have a cute little heart shaped bladder-**THAT** also got a good laugh!!! Who knows? All I know is that an event that could have been terrifying and catastrophic was incredibly positive and ten years later, I realize that moment transformed my relationship with medical professionals. It’s the dawn of a new era in medicine and I for one find it most effective when I discover doctors that I can **partner** with, relate to, laugh with, and learn from. Since that event, I make it a practice of finding the most personable doctors to work with and be treated by-ones that have the ability to really recognize and relate to the **human-ness** of the patient. Gone are the days when I will allow myself to be intimidated by medical professionals with dry and seemingly insensitive attitudes. It’s really important for the well being of all of us to find a common ground. I have a great relationship with all of the physicians that treat me and keep me in one piece…. except of course, for my ophthalmologist. We just don’t see eye to eye.” (**Say the last part very deadpan and wait for the laugh**).

There’s a huge lesson to be learned from that story and slowly but surely, we are learning to partner patients and colleagues to find the means and methods to use humor therapeutically in all aspects of medicine. Humor unites people. It creates a common bond and encourages a mutual respect and connection between doctor and patient or doctor and colleague. Humor builds the bridge to camaraderie and more fulfilling and sustained interpersonal relationships.

Have any of you seen the cartoon of three doctors in an operating room? The surgeons are huddled over a patient; the middle surgeon, all suited up from headgear to booties has scalpel in hand and over his head is the thought bubble…. “My nose does not itch…my nose does not itch…my nose…” How many times has any one of us been in a similar situation? Even if we are not in the midst of an intense surgical procedure, every one of us can relate to the awkward moment when we wonder if we are prepared to attend to personal situations in the midst of intense circumstances. For patients that might see that particular simple illustration and thought bubble, it can work to establish empathy for the medical professional while inspiring a hearty chuckle.

Someone once said, “Laughter is the shock absorber that eases the blows of life.” Humor is beginning to be considered more seriously as an alternative therapy in medical treatments. We can go to the website of the American Cancer Society and see an entire page devoted to humor therapy. The page offers this description, “Humor therapy is the use of humor for the relief of physical or emotional pain and stress. It is used as a complementary method to promote health and cope with illness.” The page goes on to define the overview of the subject and to offer further explanation: “Although available scientific evidence does not support claims that laughter can cure cancer or any other disease, it can reduce stress and enhance a person’s quality of life. Humor has physical effects because it can stimulate the circulatory system, immune system, and other systems in the body. Humor therapy is generally used to improve quality of life, provide pain relief, encourage relaxation, and reduce stress. Researchers have described different types of humor. Passive humor results from seeing prepared material, such as watching a funny movie or stand-up comedy or reading an amusing book. Spontaneous or unplanned humor involves finding humor in everyday situations. Being able to find humor in life can be helpful when dealing with cancer.”

I believe that being able to find humor in life **can** be helpful in dealing with **any** stressful situation. I’ve heard about a physician that moonlights as a stand up comedian. I hope he memorizes his jokes-with **a doctor’s** handwriting; he probably wouldn’t be able to read his own notes! (**Wait for the laugh**). But really, folks, the person I am referring to is Dr. Stuart Silverstein and he spent several years of his early career complementing his pediatric practice with stand-up comedy. Of his dual careers he has been quoted as saying (In the New York Times, no less-his mother must have been very proud!) ''It's much easier to treat a patient when they're happy. And when you're laughing you don't feel the pain as much. As for a doctor being funny, well, I never heard anyone say, 'I wish my doctor were more serious.'”

In an article titled, “Humor and Health: Is It Effective?” in the Journal for Pre-Health Affiliated Students, we learn, “Humor affects patient-physician communication. By reducing the stress level of patients and medical professionals, humor tightens interpersonal gaps, conveys caring, and relieves the anxiety and fears associated with medical care. In addition to relieving stress in the medical workplace, humor creates good working relationships and improves morale for the medical professionals. Patients use humor as a guise to express their true concerns and disappointments with the medical care system, so doctors should be alert to this less-obvious form of communication.”

Maybe you’ve heard this one… A man goes to the eye doctor complaining that he has great pain in his eye when drinking tea. After close examination, the doctor advises the patient that he must stop drinking tea. The patient, clearly distressed with the news says, “But Doctor!! I LOVE to drink tea!! The doctor reluctantly replies, “Okay then, as long as you take the spoon out of the cup.” (**Wait for the laugh**).

Of course being part of the evolved and modern society we live in provides us access to even more medical humor. You might have heard these two little gems:

* “If you trust Google more than your doctors, then maybe it’s time to switch doctors.”
* “My doctor just gave me two weeks to live. I hope they’re in August.”

But seriously, folks…. it’s no secret that we really **do** live in an era where time is moving faster, most of us are working longer and more stressful hours, we’re bombarded with information around the clock, and it feels like we just cannot get off the rat wheel that has become the norm as far as modern day existence goes. We’re fortunate that we have unprecedented access to better and more sophisticated medical information and therapies, but sometimes we have to really look inside ourselves and discover time proven techniques to really soothe and heal the mind and soul and ultimately the body. Laughter is a gift and we all deserve that. We all deserve the opportunity to feel optimism and joy, positivity and human connection, even in small doses. As we learn to live through the era of information, we have to remember that everyone has access, not just the professionals, and as people become more savvy, they will warrant more respect and partnership from the medical professionals that care for and treat them. I’ll leave you with these witty and thoughtful words. Although the French philosopher Voltaire said, “God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh,” Mark Twain taught us, “The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter.” As medical professionals, we are faced with potential crises and tragedies every day by the hundreds, if not thousands of cases. The stress level can be daunting. On the other side, we have patients and staff who really need to be supported and guided through the processes of treatment, healing and resolution. A little humor goes a long way. I hope that this talk has sprouted some ideas about how **YOU** can “lighten up a life” and spread some healing the old fashioned way, with a joke and a smile and some laughter.

Before I leave you, I want to know, who can ever forget the old classic about the man who goes to his doctor. After the check up and a seemingly endless battery of tests and procedures, the doctor breaks the bad news and says, “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but you only have 3 months to live.” The patient is visibly shaken and blurts out, “But doctor!! That’s awful!!! And I owe you so much money!!! How will I have time to pay you back???” And the doctor replies, “Oh, alright, I‘ll give you another 3 months.” (**Wait for the laugh**).

May you all have happy, healthy and laughter filled careers and lives. Thank you all!