

**SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER**

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**Humor has fans in medical circles**

*Tuesday, March 14, 2006*

**By SUSAN PHINNEY**  
P-I REPORTER

It's 8 a.m. on a Friday at Harborview Medical Center, and hilarity reigns.

Hugs and laughter engulf patients, staff and various drop-ins as they walk into a room. A man in a striped Dr. Seuss-like hat herds them into something resembling a circle and starts leading them in chants:

"Ho, ho, ha ha ha."

They stretch and pick imaginary grapes. They clap, they tickle, they hoot, they laugh. They chant:

"Ho, ho, ha ha ha."

Over the next 30 minutes, the roaring laughter grows to an ear-splitting level usually associated with a hot comedy club late on a Saturday night.

This is trauma central? A hospital?

Indeed.

A growing body of research suggests laughing, no matter what causes it, can boost your immune system, ease muscle tension and generally make you feel better. And laughter therapy classes are popping up everywhere, including at Harborview, the Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center, the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and other facilities where ill, injured or just plain stressed-out people gather.

At 2 p.m. on a recent Tuesday, 10 men and women (one attached to an IV) were laughing in a room at the Wellness Center. They appeared to range in age from about 30 to 80. They weren't as noisy as the Harborview crew, but they sure knew how to laugh.

Coach Gail Wolz, a laughter leader certified by an organization called the World Laughter Tour, gave a quick review of the health benefits of laughter: "Don't get mad, get funny," she advised. "Laughter helps open blood vessels, enhances your immune system. It reduces stress. Don't you feel good after you've laughed?"

She passed out straws and told the group to hold



**zoom**

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From left, Elva Dodd, Tita Begashaw, Nan Fawthrop and Judy Cashman, attend a weekly laugh class at Harborview Medical Center. Begashaw helped organize the hospital's laugh classes, which started in 2000. A growing body of research suggests laughing, no matter what causes it, can boost your immune system.

them horizontally between their teeth -- an exercise demonstrating it's easier to smile with your face in this position. They donned hats made of balloons, tickled each other with balloon baguettes and laughed some more.

Therapeutic laughter fitness originated in India in the 1990s when Dr. Madan Kataria, a believer in the healing powers of laughter, took a group to a public park to laugh.

Kevin Wilhelmsen, the man in the Dr. Seuss-like hat, is a clinical nurse educator for psychiatry at Harborview. He said one of his colleagues, Tita Begashaw, had encountered one of these "park laughs" while visiting India.

She returned to Seattle, sent out a flier and invited people to gather in front of Harborview for a laugh session in the summer of 2000. Six years later, the weekly laugh classes are part of Harborview's routine.

Elva Dodd has been with the group for five years, traveling from West Seattle and slowly making her way through Harborview's long halls with her walker. Once inside the room, she sheds her Birkenstocks, joins the circle and uses her walker to punctuate gestures others make with their arms.

"Laughter does discourage pain. Laugh until it heals," Dodd says after class.

Today there are laughter clubs in almost every state and the World Laughter Tour that helps spread the word. Training of laughter leaders is co-sponsored by Columbus (Ohio) State Community College. Seminars, workshops and continuing education programs are held throughout the country.

Laughter may not be the *best* medicine, but it's certainly gaining status as one that's too good to ignore.

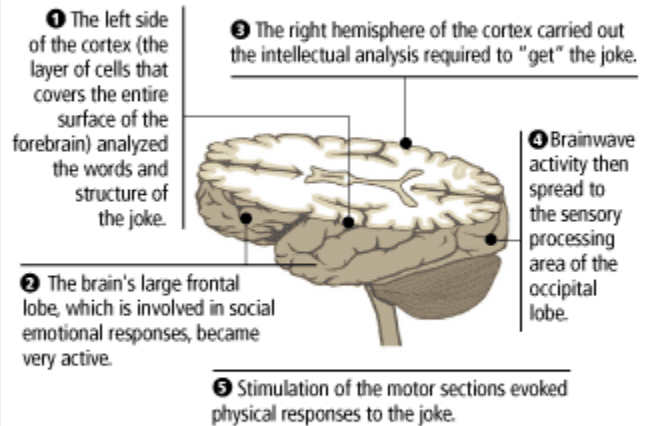
"A belly laugh increases the ability of your immune system to fight infections," says Elizabeth Taylor, on the faculty of Bastyr University, the Seattle-area institution devoted to natural medicine.

"Laughter is the power of positive healing," she said. "I've seen it work best for people with losses -- death, divorce, a job, for example. Humor is a tool to empower people to move forward. It helps them improve their quality of life, to take better care of themselves."

Laughter is also a major weapon against stress. Taylor says we can allow road rage to stress us out, or we can turn it into road laughter. When stuck in traffic, she recommends looking at people, assessing the situation, seeing what people are doing, even singing. Make it fun.

## LAUGHTER AND THE BRAIN

Though the process isn't fully understood, the production of laughter involves various regions of the brain. By studying the brain activity of subjects responding to humorous material, researchers observed this pattern:



The apparent production of laughter via a circuit through many regions of the brain is different from how emotional responses occur -- in specific areas of the brain.

Source: Information based on findings by Peter Derks, professor of psychology at the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

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zoom

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Elva Dodd, left, laughs along with Nan Fawthrop during a laughter class last week at Harborview Medical Center. Dodd, who lives in West Seattle, has been attending the weekly classes for five years.

Count the nose pickers, she says, or the number of people talking on cell phones. Or pretend you have a cell phone in your hand and are having a hilarious conversation with an imaginary friend.

Jane Cornman, a psychiatric nurse practitioner and a senior lecturer at University of Washington, says "laughter is like one tiny piece of all the self-care strategies. Relaxation response is the most important of these techniques. Laughter is one way to arrive at a relaxation response. We teach a lot of different ways to achieve relaxation. Laughter is one of them," she said.

Laughter can literally ease pain. We use energy focusing on pain when we're ill. Our muscles tense. When distracted by laughter, our focus shifts away from pain, we relax and the body gets a few minutes of relief.

Robin Adler, director of mind-body medicine at Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center, said the facility started "Laugh Club" in October 2004 after a woman contacted her and suggested she hold a laugh club on the premises.

"I wasn't sure about it," Adler said. "Then she came in and started telling me what laughter does for the body." It was similar to mind/body training she was already doing. So Adler gave her the go ahead. "That has been our most popular offering, and we offer a lot of classes here."

Weslie Ann Rodgers has been attending the laugh sessions since she was diagnosed with breast cancer a year ago. She said she'd always been serious, but the classes have enabled her to lighten up. "It's taken awhile. It's a process," Rodgers said.

The late editor Norman Cousins is frequently credited for promoting humor as a healer, and wrote a book about the experience. In the 1960s, Cousins was diagnosed with a life threatening disease similar to lupus. In addition to traditional medical treatments, he took high doses of Vitamin C, practiced positive thinking and watched old Marx Brothers films to make certain he had daily doses of laughter.

In the 1980s Cousins called Dr. Lee Berk, associate professor in the School of Public Health and associate research professor of pathology and laboratory medicine at Loma Linda University in California. Berk was among the first to research the effects of laughter on the immune system.

"I was already on that track," when Cousins called, Berk said. "I was looking at exercise and the effect on endorphins and wondering if other behaviors (laughter, for example) would be beneficial."

But when he presented his first findings to the American College of Sports Medicine, the group's members rejected the thought that exercise could help the immune system. Berk told Cousins about the need for more research and Cousins volunteered to pay for a study.

Through the 1990s "we chipped away at small individual studies looking at different components of the immune system and how they changed with laughter. Studies found that components were being modified, optimized," Berk said.

That doesn't mean that therapeutic laughter has become mainstream medicine. "It's accepted as music is accepted" as therapy, Berk said. But he noted that teaching alternative theories in general is now required in medical schools.

Berk is also an advocate of classes that teach laughter with "ho, ho, ho" exercises and other methods.

"Laughter clubs, laughing for laughter's sake may sound silly, but think of it as exercise," he said.

Or as Wolz concluded a recent class, "May the farce be with you."

## **MORE INFORMATION**

- Harborview Medical Center holds laughter classes at 8 a.m. every Friday in the Patient and Family Resource Center, Room GEH-76. Call 206-731-3544. Classes are free and open to the public.
- Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center offers classes once a month. For dates, times and information, call Robin Adler at 206-292-2277.
- "The Healing Power of Humor," by Allen Klein, published in 1989 (Tracher, 240 pages, \$13.95) was recommended to those attending a laughter session at Seattle Cancer Treatment and Wellness Center.
- "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient," by Norman Cousins (Norton & Co., 192 pages, \$13.95), chronicles his recovery from a life-threatening illness. His regimen included daily doses of belly laughs.
- [www.worldlaughtertour.com](http://www.worldlaughtertour.com) has details about laughter therapy sites around the nation, as well as training information.

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