

Laughter and magic; the best medicine By Charlotte Halle

CLOWNING AROUND: Magician Tulkoff applies his therapy to a young patient's funnybone.

What does it say about the Israeli economy when an experienced marketing consultant can make a better living dressing up as a clown than he can working in business? Michael Tulkoff (Meir, in Hebrew)- or "Magic Michael" as he is better known in children's wards across Israel - is not here to answer such questions; he is here to make children laugh.



And there was no shortage of laughter at Dana Children's Hospital in Tel Aviv last Sunday, where Tulkoff works three shifts a week as a "medical magician." A 12-year-old boy hops out of his wheelchair to play bowls with a fully-costumed Tulkoff. A baby shrieks with laughter as Tulkoff blows bubbles at her and a small boy from Nigeria - in Israel for surgery on his lungs - beams as Tulkoff hands him a fish on a fishing rod made out of balloons.

Back in Baltimore, Maryland, where Tulkoff and his family lived before moving to Israel 18 months ago, the 39-year-old split his time between working in marketing and as a children's magician, which included regular shifts at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Having "been smitten" by magic since the age of 11 after seeing a magician perform, Tulkoff says he prefers to use the term "medical magician" to describe his work, rather than the more common terms of "hospital clown" or "clown doctor," because he tries to incorporate an element of rehabilitation into his magic.

"I'm not there simply to make the kids laugh or giggle," he says, "but to help - whether it's getting over the fear of a painful examination or making their potentially traumatic stay in hospital a bit easier. I try to introduce a degree of empowering the children too."

Indeed, when the 12-year-old boy in the wheelchair opens his hand to find that one red ball has multiplied into eight, he looks at his father with delight: "How did I do that, dad? How did I do it?"

Prior to doing "his rounds" on a particular children's ward - he divides most of his time between the general, oncology and surgical wards - Tulkoff asks the nurses for a briefing about the patients. That way, he says, he can encourage children who need to strengthen their lungs to blow bubbles or play wind instruments, and he can give those children who need to practice their walking a balloon dog on a balloon leash.

"I believe that good memories can replace bad ones," says Tulkoff. "Hospitals can be the place they

learned the rudiments of juggling and had a tremendous belly laugh instead of remembering a sad, uncomfortable situation." Tulkoff also tries to be available in case nurses call him to rush off and distract a child who is refusing a test or becoming potentially violent. Before his shift - when Tulkoff is still in his street clothes and drinking coffee in the hospital cafeteria - he greets patients and their relatives, some of whom do a double take. "I didn't recognize you," says a shocked teenage girl.

As Magic Michael, Tulkoff makes his rounds in a brightly-colored waistcoat and matching cap with two different colored high-top shoes, carrying a violin case full of tricks and gadgets. Meir Tulkoff, however, wears a gray suit, revealing the tsitsit, or fringes, worn by Orthodox Jews, and a black kippa (skullcap) under a black hat.

"I like breaking people's preconceived notions," he says. "I see it as building bridges." Tulkoff says this with regard to both Jews and non-Jews who find themselves in hospitals. Christians and Muslims "can see a Jew who sincerely pours himself into the welfare of their loved ones," in addition to the medical care they are receiving at the hospital, he says.

Since moving to Israel, Tulkoff's Russian and Arabic are slowly improving - and although having a common language with the patient is not essential, he says it helps, especially with teenagers. He recalls working in a rehabilitation hospital in Jerusalem last year, when he met a 19-year-old with a degenerative illness who could barely move except for his head and one hand, which he used to control his wheelchair. Tulkoff reports that he tied balloons to the young man's wheelchair and listened to him rave about his wonderful doctor. "His name was Jihad," says Tulkoff. "Maybe he can bring a change to others. Just as the actions of one crazy person can destroy - as with suicide bombers - so the opposite is the case. One person can help repair."

Though Tulkoff steers clear of talking politics or religion with patients - aside from a trick or two which revolve around the mitzvot (commandments) or Jewish holidays - he does try to include educational messages on topics such as nutrition, recycling and safety. His wife, Debbie Tulkoff, a special education teacher, helps him devise programs, which he performs in schools, summer camps and private homes, and his five children, aged one to 14, play their part as the test audience at the family home in Rehovot. Tulkoff has been volunteering at his local hospital, Kaplan Medical Center in Rehovot, since March. "It's not just for the patients," he says. "It's for the parents and the staff too - including the cleaners. Goofing around is a great antidote against burnout."

According to Tulkoff, the field of medical clowning is a growing one in Israel. In October, he began teaching medical wizardry and balloon sculpting at Rabin Medical Center in Petah Tikvah as part of a course called "Humor in the Care of Sick Children in Hospitals." One of the key skills of the job, he says, is "to be able to assess from quickly observing the people in the room whether or not it's an appropriate situation to put my nose in. I never just barrel into a room. This is not a summer camp; the child is sick." As for whether specific skills are needed this side of the Atlantic, Tulkoff believes not. "So you can't make jokes about Bamba (Israel's most popular snack food) in the States, but children smile in the same way all over the world." ###

More information at www.KidsMagician.com, www.MagicsDocumentary.com