



DIVINE CLOWNS AND THE ART OF ANIMATING ELDERLY: EXPERIENCE REPORT

DIVINOS PALHAÇOS E A ARTE DE ANIMAR IDOSOS: RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA PAYASOS DIVINOS Y EL ARTE DE ANIMAR ANCIANOS: RELATO DE EXPERIENCIA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: report the activities of a university outreach project as a proposal for the humanization of assistance and a tool for academic education in the health field. **Method:** descriptive study, with an experience report design, conducted by means of observational methods, within the period from April 2011 to March 2012, in a home for the aged in Divinópolis, Minas Gerais, Brazil. **Results:** the study was approved by the institutions involved and creating the group “Divine Clowns” enabled the making of the “Divine Medical Record”, the preparation of clown actors, and the participation of elderly people in clown activities. **Conclusion:** in the project reported in this study, the theoretical knowledge about the health of the elderly are put into practice when the student plays the role of a clown, constituting both a proposal for humanization of assistance and a teaching tool in the health field. **Descriptors:** Home for the Aged; Laugh; Humanization of Assistance; Health of the Elderly.

RESUMO

Objetivo: relatar as atividades de um projeto de extensão universitária como proposta de humanização da assistência e ferramenta de formação acadêmica na área da saúde. **Método:** estudo descritivo, do tipo relato de experiência, realizado a partir de métodos observacionais, no período de abril de 2011 a março de 2012, em uma instituição de longa permanência em Divinópolis (MG). **Resultados:** o estudo obteve aprovação das instituições envolvidas e a criação do grupo “Divinos Palhaços” proporcionou a elaboração do “Divino Prontuário”, a preparação de atores palhaços e a participação de idosos em atividades de *clown*. **Conclusão:** no projeto relatado neste estudo, os conhecimentos teóricos sobre a saúde do idoso são postos em prática na atuação do discente como *clown*, constituindo tanto uma proposta de humanização da assistência como uma ferramenta de ensino na área da saúde. **Descritores:** Instituição de Longa Permanência para Idosos; Riso; Humanização da Assistência; Saúde do Idoso.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: relatar las actividades de un proyecto de extensión universitaria como una propuesta para humanización de la atención y una herramienta para la formación académica en el área de la salud. **Método:** estudio descriptivo, del tipo relato de experiencia, llevado a cabo por medio de métodos de observación, en el período comprendido entre abril de 2011 y marzo de 2012, en un hogar para ancianos en Divinópolis, Minas Gerais, Brasil. **Resultados:** el estudio fue aprobado por las instituciones involucradas y la creación del grupo “Payasos Divinos” proporcionó la elaboración del “Divino Prontuario”, la preparación de payasos actores y la participación de ancianos en actividades de *clown*. **Conclusión:** en el proyecto relatado en este estudio, los conocimientos teóricos acerca de la salud del anciano se ponen en práctica durante la actuación del discente como *clown*, lo que constituye tanto una propuesta de humanización de la atención como una herramienta de enseñanza en el área de la salud. **Descriptores:** Hogar de Ancianos; Risa; Humanización de la Atención; Salud del Anciano.

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INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, where poverty and social inequality coexist, population aging has posed a great challenge by requiring more attention from public health mainly with regard to the allocation of resources.¹

As this scenario takes place, our country has shown an accelerated demographic transition process, with an increased elderly population that, as a consequence, will boost the demand for homes for the aged (HAs).^{1,2}

The HA is regarded as a social and organizational system whose purpose is embracing elderly people devoid of financial resources, with no family group, or even in a situation of family abandonment.³

A part of the Brazilian population may, at some point in its life, live and/or need the care provided by these institutions. In addition to these assignments, it is worth highlighting that the HA must provide the elderly person with a comprehensive living, with a daily life of his own, as well as her/his senses, her/his intellectual capabilities, her/his feelings, and her/his ideologies.^{4,5}

According to the Elderly Health Program and the Brazilian Elderly Statute, we must seek innovative proposals regarding elderly health, encouraging their citizenship, identity, autonomy, and well-being, that can be achieved through projects and/or programs that encourage hours of entertainment, including activities aimed at this audience.⁶

Thus, the activities aimed at the elderly should include activities that encourage them to a more active and creative life, covering humanization aspects that favor the elderly communication, socialization, and autonomy.^{7,8} It is worth stressing that humanize includes the act of listening to the other, identifying themselves as human beings.^{9,10}

In line with this thinking, a physician, founder and director of the Gesundheit Institute, who works as a clown for over thirty years, claims that joy, laugh, and kindness help people maintaining or improving their health, because there is encouragement for life.¹¹

By means of this view, there emerged the university outreach project "Divine Clowns and the art of animating elderly people" by a federal public university in Divinópolis, Minas Gerais, Brazil, where students from the courses of Medicine, Nursing, and Pharmacy, along with professors from the Nursing course, this project for humanization in the institutionalized environment of the elderly.

METHOD

Descriptive study, with an experience report, on the activities conducted in an outreach project, as an innovative proposal in the elderly health area and as an academic education tool.

The activities were introduced through descriptive and observational methods. The experience report is regarded as a tool for descriptive research, which aims to present a reflection on an action or set of actions related to a practice experienced in the professional or educational context and having interest on the part of the scientific community.¹²

The activities that resulted in the writing of this report occurred within the period from April 2011 to March 2012 in a HA in Divinópolis. There was no need to submit it to an Ethics Committee on Research involving Human Beings, because it reports an experience of authors themselves. However, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for the subjects participating in the project and the institution where the activities took place.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The outreach project "Divine Clowns and the art of animating elderly people" started through the expression of interest from a group of students of Medicine in engaging in clown activities (clown's art) along with hospitalized people.

Initially, the proposal was focused on animation for hospitalized children and adults, however, during group meetings, a need for working along with HAs in Divinópolis was found out. Thus, students' interest in clown activities enabled the construction of this project, something which reinforces the importance of university outreach in academic education, by providing students with the opportunity to freely think and learn the interaction with other services beyond the curriculum, favoring an autonomous learning that consolidates knowledge.¹³

The practice of animation poses a challenge and a new working perspective in the Brazilian public and private institutions. In Brazil, such experiences are scattered throughout the territory and they have a huge potential towards humanization. However,

such experiences are often conducted with the hospitalized population, there are few reports of projects involving animation for institutionalized elderly people.

The need for humanizing the relations and care provided for the elderly living in a HA confirms the importance of an activity that aims to bring joy to the elderly, dealing in a playful way with her/his routine and the procedures to which they are exposed. Scholars from a university in Ontario, Canada, highlight that clown interventions along with the elderly population are relatively new, but recent researches have suggested that some elderly people who use humor as a way to deal with the challenges of aging may be more likely to live longer, age well, and be more satisfied with their physical health, enjoying better quality of life.¹⁴

The purpose of this project was inspired by the history of Hunter Adams, a physician who, in the 1960s, proposed a bond between doctor and patient not focused on disease, providing “medical care” in a playful way, through clown characters. The project had the support

from the university campus principal’s office, the Dean’s Office for University Outreach, and a theater group responsible for training the group, whose expertise and experience to do this was crucial to project’s progress. The project was also approved and supported by the HA involved.

Initially, a selection process of students to participate in the project took place. The process was conducted by three professors responsible for the project, considering as criteria: academic performance, availability and flexibility, and theatrical or playful experience.²⁰ In total, 20 students were selected, 10 from the course of Medicine, 7 from the Nursing course, and 3 from the course of Pharmacy.

Before starting the project, students and professors came together to define the name and the logo design. Thus, the group was named “Divine Clowns” and a student designed its symbol (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Logo design of the group Divine Clowns.

The students and professors also created a website to disseminate the project activities, arranging information such as: schedule of activities, list of professors and students participating, photos of interventions carried out, and presentations in events, partners and links related to clown activities. This site was hosted on the university’s web portal.

The first phase of the project started through a situational analysis of the selected nursing home, where elderly characterization data was collected, which were recorded in the so-called “Elderly Divine Medical Record”. In these “medical records” there were registers regarding: age, educational level, marital status, race, religion, retirement, length of institutionalization, previous residence, family contacts, reason for institutionalization. Data on pathologies, use of medications, nutrition, and living habits of

the elderly, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, physical activity, and recreation, were also recorded. In this medical record, as in another study, we also recorded the reactions of the elderly during or after the activities with clowns.¹⁵

By recognizing the profile of these elderly people, their life history, associated pathologies, and the recreational activities they participated in at the HA, we moved towards the second step: the preparation of clown actors. To do this, we used as initial strategies 2 workshops offered by a theater group experienced in training “clown doctors”, which prepared the group of students and professors involved in the project, with a total of 18 theoretical classes and 4 practical classes.

The theoretical workshops covered the following aspects of theatrical training:

concentration, relationship, perception, vocal preparation, singing, improvisation, practical class, white and interpreted reading activities, pantomime, memorization technique, text-dramaturgy study, and scene creation. Practical classes were held in the HA, so that students could get acquainted with the institutional techniques and context. A project conducted along with pediatric units also suggests the importance of training workshops aimed at allowing participants to know the experience of humanization by means of experience reports, group dynamics, and awareness-raising exercises.¹⁵

After the preparatory workshops, the HA was contacted and the days for conducting clown activities with the elderly were determined. Students and professors attended these meetings on available times according to the schedule of university activities. Thus, the third stage was designed and executed with animation activities along with the institutionalized elderly people according to the action plan:

- 42 visits to the HA, involving the approach to the 104 elderly people. Theatrical clown activities, group dynamics, plays, songs, talks, and improvisation techniques took place along with the institutionalized elderly people. Other studies also suggest similar activities, such as: nursery rhymes, magic tricks, improvisations, dances, dramatizations, games, and songs, grounded in clown theater techniques.^{15,16}

- The group used in performances a specific vocabulary, encouraging laugh, but always observing the ethical precepts and good manners.

- Such activities were conducted in group or individually and observing the elderly person's cognitive status at regular hours, twice a week, so that their autonomy and dignity were preserved. However, due to the characteristics of the institutional dynamics, the visits lasted for up to 2 hours, at most. A study suggests that visits by clowns should be scheduled at regular times, occurring, at least, once a week, with an average length of 3 hours.¹⁵

As in the case of a study that reported an experience of elderly animation in Portugal⁶, the elderly people were arranged in 3 groups, by applying a functional assessment scale, the functional independence measure (FIM), validated for the Brazilian context, by a study¹⁷: autonomous, physically dependent, and weak and dependent. We also applied a validated scale for assessing the elderly person's cognitive functions, the mini mental state examination (MMSE), which allowed

assessing cognitive function and identifying dementing conditions¹⁸, thus trying to implement the activities according to the elderly person's physical and cognitive abilities.

The resources used during interventions were:

- The use of white coats with the inscription "Divine Clowns" and a drawing that was the slogan created by the group (Figure 1);

- The characterization of clowns, each one created a character of her/his own using wigs, hats, clown nose, and clown makeup itself.

During visits, toy materials were used, such as: pliers, hammers, screwdrivers, whistles, puppets, among others. According to some studies, each clown must have her/his own identity and style, carrying her/his own trademarks, such as the red nose, characteristic instruments (guitars, *pandeiros*, and whistles)¹⁵, colored plastic toys imitating tools (pliers, hammers, saws, screwdrivers), miniature clothes irons, and watches.¹⁴

It is noteworthy that within the period of activities in the HA, the students were provided with professional psychological care every 15 days, individually and/or in group, according to the demands shown.

During the clown activities, some results have been achieved, such as: project dissemination along with managers, caregivers, and professionals who work with these elderly people in the HA; the production of students' knowledge on the aging process; the experience of the group of students and professors in providing institutionalized elderly people with care based on the premise of humanizing health care and the ability to intermediate moments of entertainment and laugh with the elderly and professionals from the HA. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the clown is a humanizing element in health relationships, by making available to the institutionalized elderly person the pleasure of laughing, broadening their life perspective and showing other possibilities in the context of institutionalization.¹⁴

The group also received many invitations to introduce the work conducted in institutional events and others organized by the municipal health department. As limitation of the group's work, we may cite the difficulty of fulfilling activities and plays with elderly people having a certain physical and cognitive limitation, the fact that the group did not have a location available and reserved for the preparation of makeup and costumes and it does not have a specific means of

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