

What's so funny?

Recognizing how much nurses need humor, the author founded the Chuckle Channel and created the immortal “Ivy Push, RN.”

By Hob Osterlund, CNS, BC

I'VE HAD MANY fine teachers in the art of luxurious laughter. The first was my father, and he was hands down the best. Evidently, he came by the talent naturally. A 1917 photo shows him sitting on an old Texas porch, tongue tartly in cheek, his mother and grandparents doubled over in hysterics over something he'd said.

It wasn't that Dad told jokes. It was that he constantly tripped, toes over torso, on the absurdity of human nature. I rarely heard him criticize anyone. He was interested in you. Yes, *you*. He often laughed himself to tears over some unspoken observation, and I promise you his laughter was as contagious as *Klebsiella*.

About 3 million years ago, a pair of nursing instructors sucker-punched me with a mountain of evidence regarding my “inappropriate use of humor.” Laughter, they said, was too personal to share with patients. Clinical distance was the ticket.

Because of them, I dove deeply into my sorry soul—and there I got a grasp. Humor is like paint. If it's on exterior siding, it's protective. If it's framed, it's art. But if it's sniffed, it's poison. Humor can be magic or it can be deadly. Thus began my career studying humor as well as writing, performing, and producing comedy.

In 1998, my comedy alter-ego, “Ivy Push, RN,” hit the stage. My hundreds of performances as Ivy showed me nurses' raw eagerness to connect through laughter and con-

vinced me that the nature of our work requires us to find humor on this blasted blessed bruised planet. I also realized just how invisible nursing is to the public and how destructive that invisibility is to the health of our world.

In response, I launched the “Chuckle Channel” comedy programming at The Queen's Medical Center (QMC) in Honolulu where I work. While informally interviewing patients about their experience with the films, I had an epiphany: I'd always assumed TV was a thing. But now I saw it's actually a relationship—an intimate one. Patients are naked with the TV. They spend the night with it. They're vulnerable to it in every way. Why not, then, give them something gentle and friendly to watch?

With the help of a Lloyd Symington Foundation grant, I expanded the Chuckle Channel content and made it available nationally. To keep the humor therapeutic, I created the SUFI criteria: All material must be Suitable for all ages, Uplifting, Funny, and Inclusive. Nothing crude, cruel, or demoralizing passes muster. The films are now available by subscription to all North American hospitals and are shown in such settings as Aurora Healthcare

System, Wisconsin; Children's Hospital Boston; Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, California; New York University Medical Center; QMC; San Jacinto Methodist in

Texas; and the University of Wisconsin Hospital.

In 2007, I became a principal investigator for the COMIC (Comedy in Chemotherapy) Study at QMC, a first-of-its-kind randomized trial that looks at comedy's impact

on the symptoms, stress, and immune function of outpatients receiving chemotherapy. Once we have the results, we'll be delighted to share what we've learned directly from the participants.

Until then, keep up the good work. I know it's hard. I know the practice of nursing can leave you enervated. If you find your sense of humor blocked, I recommend a CT scan of your belly. If your laugh is blocked, you're a nurse; you know what to do. ★



Hob Osterlund is a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Pain and Palliative Care at The Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu. She's also an award-winning journalist; the performer behind Ivy Push, RN; host of the Chuckle Channel; and President of Health, Humor & Hospitals, Inc. (chucklechannel.com). For Ivy Push DVDs, visit ivypush.com.

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