



**DOSSIER
DE PRESSE 2015**



IN 2015, PUBLIC AUTHORITIES ACCREDIT THE HOSPITAL CLOWNING PROFESSION FOR THE FIRST TIME.

FROM DREAM TO REALITY

Who would have thought that the publication of an austere decree in the French Official Journal could mean a dream come true!

Yet, this was the case with the **publication of the Official Journal announcing the qualifying certification of the training program for actor-clowns in health care facilities**.

This came as the fulfilment of a dream born some 30 years ago on a campus on the East coast of the United States. Caroline Simonds, a young American, had then imagined that one day there might be a building flanking the Medical School that would offer training programs for artists who wished to work in hospitals, and specifically for "hospital clowns", which Michael Christensen had just invented through the creation of a Clown Care Unit within his circus: The Big Apple Circus.

1991, BIRTH OF LE RIRE MÉDECIN

At this pioneering stage, clowns were not specifically trained to play on the peculiar scene of hospitals, where trying to make people laugh seemed anything but obvious. Caroline Simonds, who was part of the first team, strongly felt this lack of professional training. Because it was impossible at the time to put forth the absolute necessity of professional training and the fact that, far from curbing artistic creativity and spontaneity, it would help free the artist, she chose to cross the Atlantic and create her own organization in France. Hence, Le Rire Médecin was born in 1991, the first European experiment in professional clown interventions in pediatric hospital services.



DEVELOPING AND PROFESSIONALIZING HOSPITAL CLOWNING PRACTICES

The transmission of a profession

Right from the start and true to her beliefs, Caroline Simonds was not only intent on training the actors she recruited: she also chose them according to their potential to become training instructors in turn, because she didn't want to bear the role of transmission on her own. Since the first casting session until today for the almost 100 clowns in the Company, **the ability to instruct trainers has been a key-criterion**. It lends the clowns at Le Rire Médecin a "special something", a particular "spirit" that is probably responsible for the group's identity and specificity. This also explains how Le Rire Médecin quickly became a **model** in its field. In fact, most people who are enthused by this new form of artistic intervention for hospitalized children and wish to take part in the experiment turn to Le Rire Médecin for training. In France and abroad, instructors at Le Rire Médecin provide **professionalizing training** so as to ensure the artistic quality of the interventions, as well as the "right tone" required to address the complex human situations in which the clowns practice their art. Thanks to this substantial action, France is now probably one of the countries with the best quality hospital clown groups and where interventions have been developed in the least anarchic and most professional manner.

Creation of Le Rire Médecin Training Institute

However, the dream wasn't quite fulfilled yet. Although Le Rire Médecin was able to bring support to clown groups, nothing was offered to clown-actors who wished, on an individual basis, to be initiated to the arcane world of hospitals.

For this reason, Caroline Simonds and her team took a decisive step five years ago and created **Le Rire Médecin Training Institute** which, in addition to offering the full range of existing training programs, made it its mission to implement a training program for actors who wish to devote their work to the hospital milieu.

Three years of relentless and dedicated efforts were put into designing a **truly professionalizing training program**. Targeted at experienced actors with a solid artistic career, the aim of this training program is to teach clowns what the hospital is all about. This means not only how it is operated, its daily routine, subtleties in terms of hierarchy or health and safety rules, but also the main health conditions treated there, the therapeutic means



used, their consequences, the treatment of pain; in short, anything that may help clowns to tailor their intervention to the needs of each child they visit and for which, room after room, they will **perform customized shows**. In addition to hospital know-how, actors will also learn, during the **five months** of the full-time training program, the necessary skills for an artist to act within pediatric services: how to marshal a full range of related artistic disciplines (singing and knowing how to play a musical instrument is essential when acting in a health facility, as well as the perfect command of a selection of magic tricks: how to highjack medical instruments so that a stethoscope becomes an iPod or a measuring tube a cackling hen...) Actors will also need to know how to adapt their clown character to the situation at hand and activate it differently depending on whether they need to "goof around" with a teenager or help lull a baby to sleep. Lastly, they will need to be proficient in **duo acting** because Le Rire Médecin clowns **always perform in pairs**. Trainees will learn all this through **theory** classes taught by the best hospital specialists (Le Rire Médecin is lucky to boast a network of health professionals that would be the envy of any medical student!) as well as through **practical workshops** with top artistic instructors. Most of all, they will be able to train in real-life situations because the greater part of the program consists in a **field experience term** in Le Rire Médecin's partner **pediatric services**.

The certification process

At this point, it became necessary to seek recognition for this demanding, thorough but also fulfilling and exciting training program. For this reason, in 2011 Le Rire Médecin Training Institute engaged in a certification process which was completed on July 28, through the publication of the decree in the Official Journal, listing the training program for **actor-clowns in health care facilities** on the French National Registry of Professional Certifications.

For Caroline Simonds and Le Rire Médecin at large, this decree comes of course as a reward for many years of efforts, but its true importance lies elsewhere.

First and foremost, and for the first time in history, this decree consecrates **the recognition of the hospital clown profession**. This is no small victory because although clowns have a very positive image with the hospital milieu and that they are magical for parents and health care givers alike, their work is rarely recognized as a true profession. On a regular basis, it is necessary to explain and convince that – because hospitalized children deserve the best there is – our clowns must be **paid professionals** and not untrained volunteers. Listing of the profession on the National Registry of Professional Certifications comes in support of our persuasion efforts.



Obtaining this certification required a full expertise of the profession: skills required, training programs susceptible of transmitting such skills and appropriate assessment tools. Such work has obviously helped develop an in-depth view of the profession, but most of all, it has encouraged the implementation of a **powerful tool for quality development**.

This certification is a formalization of best practices, which is to say of the most appropriate means to address the vulnerable public of sick children. Among the requisites: to have perfect cognizance of the intervention context – of the medical situation but mostly of the psychological and affective context – thanks to the information provided by the caregivers; interventions in pairs, in order to avoid, on the one hand, “performing a number” and on the other, engaging in a purely interpersonal relationship with the child. Notwithstanding the fact that the fact of interacting as a duo, even when the child is a pure spectator, guarantees that the young patient will always be able to choose the position they feel is the most comfortable for them.

Finally, this certification lays the foundations for **future endeavors**. Le Rire Médecin has chosen to partner with other hospital clown associations that share the same set of values and a common attachment to the fundamentals of the profession. Consequently, the French Federation of Hospital Clown Associations (Fédération Française des Associations de Clowns Hospitaliers) has accepted to sit on the **certification jury**, as well as on the **development committee**.

This will help ensure that the certification remains as close as possible to the realities of the profession and to its evolutions and that it will constantly develop along the lines of future innovations. Already, the training program, which at first only considered pediatric practices, has been open to geriatrics and handicap for a year now, dimensions that are meant to be further developed in the coming years. Keeping abreast of innovations will help the training program maximize employment opportunities for its participants.

The dream is only starting.

ABOUT LE RIRE MEDECIN TRAINING INSTITUTE

Acting for hospitalized children cannot be haphazard and nothing is more difficult than laughing in the midst of pain. This is why actor-clowns at Le Rire Médecin receive a thorough professional training, and continuing education throughout their hospital clown career as a guarantee of professionalism.



If one of the goals here is to ensure that the largest number of hospitalized children may profit from the clowns' visits, then this very specific profession should not be developed at the expense of quality or ethics.

This is why Le Rire Médecin Training Institute was founded in 2011, with the mission to ensure the best professionalization of groups and actors who seek the expertise of Le Rire Médecin.

Building upon this experience, training programs have been designed for health care givers and medical doctors, workshops for the parents as well as for companies and other organizations who work with a public of children or of vulnerable people.



© Jacques Grison - Le Rire Médecin