Armed with new research that shows laughter is powerful medicine, hospitals around the world are sending in the clowns, and seeing remarkable results.

The strange phenomenon of "medical clowns" has been validated by recent scientific studies that show circus-inspired buffoonery has health benefits that are nothing to chuckle about.

Jeffery Raz has spent most of his life as a clown under the big top with Cirque du Soliel and the Pickle Family Circus, but for the past two years his stage has shifted to a decidedly more challenging setting — hospital wards in the San Francisco Bay area.

The co-founder of the Medical Clown Project in Alameda, Calif., Raz, 45, has trained a staff of seven professional clowns on how to tailor their routines for hospitals, where they employ laughter not only as a diversion from illness, but as a way to treat it.

"I expected a fair amount of skepticism from hospitals about what we were doing, but that has not at all been what we've found," Raz told The Daily. "Ninety percent of the hospitals we talk to are hugely excited."

Taking their inspiration from "doctor clown" programs like Clown Care at New York's Big Apple Circus and Dream Doctors in Israel, Raz and his wife, psychologist Sherry Sherman, started the Medical Clown Project in 2010 on the belief that reducing stress levels aids the healing process.

"There's been tons of research on the health benefits of laughter, but it's amazing how it is still ignored as a form of treatment," Sherman said.

Recent data also confirms that the presence of clowns in hospitals can yield dramatic results.

Published in March, a study by Israeli researchers at the Assaf Harofeh Medical Centre looked at 219 women undergoing in vitro fertilization treatments, and found that 36 percent of those who were entertained by a medical clown 15 minutes following the implantation of an embryo became pregnant compared to 20 percent of those who were not entertained by a clown.

A study last year undertaken by researchers at Australia's University of New South Wales, meanwhile, found the use of medical clowns accounted for a 20 percent reduction in agitation in Alzheimer's patients, roughly equal to that seen with the use of anti-psychotic drugs.

For Robert Sarison, program manager for the Irene Swindell's Alzheimer's Residential Care Program at San Francisco's California Pacific Medical Center, the Medical Clown Project has made a stark difference in the lives of his residents.

"You see Alzheimer's patients and it's almost as if they are in a coma, very removed," Sarison said. "Clowning pulls them out of that state."

Such transformations are not uncommon events, according to Sherman and Raz.

"The first time we went on the Alzheimer's unit, one of our clowns started playing the piano, and Jeff began to juggle, and I saw this wakening up among the patients, a different attentiveness," Sherman said.

"They came alive and to see that really struck me. One of the family members later came up to us and said, 'I saw a piece of who he used to be.' "

Surprisingly, one person who laments the presence of professional clowns in hospitals is Patch Adams, who introduced the idea of the clowning doctor to the American public.

Portrayed by Robin Williams in the 1998 movie that shares his name, Adams estimates that he has performed as a clown at the death bed of more than 10,000 patients, and helped introduce the power of humor in hospital settings in 70 countries.
"I'm saddened by the fact that it has become a profession," Adams told The Daily. "I wish everybody was clowning in a hospital. Don't get me wrong, I love that clowns are doing this, but rude doctors should be fired. Of course if you did that, 50 percent of the staff would be gone."

For Adams, relegating the role of humor to specialist clowns who visit hospital wards intermittently, while full time staff members and physicians continue to ignore it, misses the point.

"I'm all for clowning in hospitals, but unless we try to infuse laughter and humor and joy as a permanent part of this, so-called 'medical clowns' will just be another job like a house cleaner or a phlebotomist," Adams said.

Sherman agrees that hospitals are in dire need of a new approach to healing, especially when it comes to adult wards, which Sherman says are often much more dreary than pediatric ones.

"Adults need to laugh as much as children," Sherman said.

Around the world, the idea of using clowns to affect health outcomes is becoming more commonplace. Clown doctor programs are now up and running in at least 18 countries.

In 2006, the University of Haifa in Israel became the first college to offer a bachelor's degree in medical clowning. It plans to start a Masters program this year.

Much of what medical clowns learn is how and when to interact with those who are sick, as well as how to integrate the art of clowning into the care being administered by nurses and doctors.

"We give the patients all the power," Raz said. "That's something they don't typically have much of in a hospital. And we work very hard to be a part of the medical team."

The California Pacific Medical Center has been so impressed with the Medical Clown Project's results that they've even begun inviting them into the emergency room, where the clowns by and large interact with patients, their family members and staff members.

"It lowers tension of both the patients and staff," Raz said, "and the ER can be a place with a tremendous amount of tension."

As yet, no American insurance plans help cover the cost of medical clowns, and the Medical Clown Project relies on grants to pay its bills.

But as more research comes in showing the medical benefits of humor in medical settings, it's not a stretch to think that hospitals around the country will soon be staffed by clowns."Clowns bring people back into a place of joy," Sarison said. "We're trying to turn a place of struggle and harshness into a place of play. With the clowns we see stress levels fall and levels of engagement go up."

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See an article in The Hospital Clown Archives on Jeff Raz