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Harpist Brings Calm to Patients, Families and Staff at Children's Colorado

Children's Colorado

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As one of the many incredible employees at our hospital, Barbara Lepke-Sims is the resident harpist at Children's Colorado. Barbara, M.M., certified music practitioner, MHTP, has been playing the harp for our patients for three years on behalf of the Department of Pastoral Care, directed by Bob Flory.

"I create a calm, relaxing environment for the patients," Barbara said. "The patient's part is just to relax and listen. This is something I can do that's helpful to the patients."

Playing soothing music to promote healing and decrease stress

Barbara travels from room to room, harp in tow, playing in some of the hospital's most high-stress environments. She most often plays in the neonatal intensive care unit (ICU), the pediatric ICU and the cardiac ICU, where patients are quite ill and often cannot engage with a music therapist (who utilize active music-making, as well as broader applications of music listening, for healing).

"In the hospital there are so many wonderful things happening for children. But the ICUs are mostly off-limits to them," Barbara recalls Bob once saying, as she explains that her "mission is to play for the patients at their bedside."



Music tailored to each patient's medical condition

With the help of the nurses, Barbara assesses patients and chooses music based on their condition. For example, if a patient needs stabilization, she will play her music at 50 to 70 beats per minute, equal to a human's resting heart rate. She can see the immediate effects of her music. Often patients' heart rates or blood pressure will stabilize after a few minutes of playing.

To achieve this, Barbara employs entrainment, a phenomenon that occurs when there is more than one pulse or beat in a room. In these situations, the weaker pulse will gravitate toward the stronger pulse. When playing the harp, Barbara's music acts as the stronger beat and the patient's weaker beat (in many cases) will change as it tries to mimic the harp's beat.

Barbara remembers one instance when cardiac ICU nurses called her into a room to play for a patient who had a worrisome blood pressure. "The minute I started playing her blood pressure started to go down," she said. "I feel very humble that this is helping people. I'm just a conduit to help facilitate a healing environment."

Staff have noticed the music's influence as well.

The soft, soothing harp helps patients, families and staff



"When I hear Barb's music in the neonatal ICU my stress level drops," said Natalie Fyles, Certified Child Life Specialist III in the neonatal ICU. "Sometimes I will sit outside of the patient's room where she is playing to just soak it in for a few minutes. The soft echo down the hallway offers a distraction to all of the monitor beeps and buzzes for our staff, parents and tiny patients."

"The pediatric ICU is an intense environment, where the emotional burden for parents is very high. Barb and her music offers a soft, gentle escape if even for just a short time," said Karen Konvolinka, MS, CCLS, Certified Child Life Specialist. "Parents have repeatedly expressed their gratitude for a service that 'Brings a smile, helps me to calm myself, lightens things up, helps to evoke a happy memory.'"

At present, Barbara plays the harp at Children's Colorado for six hours a week, spending about 30 minutes with each patient. In just three years, she estimates that she has played for more than 1,500 patients and families.

"Barb's harp playing as a music practitioner has been received with great enthusiasm," Bob said. "Nurses, physicians, volunteers, patients and families have all commented about the beauty,

peacefulness and relaxation her harp playing has provided on the units.”

Trained at Juilliard, now works at Children's Colorado

Barbara has been playing harp since she was 10 years old and she earned her master’s degree in music from the Juilliard School of Music in New York. She’s played harp professionally around the world – including European tours and for American presidents – and locally with the Denver Symphony. Barbara taught music for 23 years with Jefferson County schools.

“I feel like this job and this opportunity has put together all my skills from my life,” Barbara said. “It’s so rewarding to have the music benefit the patient. This has been the most meaningful, rewarding thing I’ve done. You’re helping their soul.”

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