

## THE USE OF CYNICAL HUMOR BY MEDICAL STAFF: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANISTIC QUALITIES IN MEDICINE

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### ABSTRACT

Humor and laughter in medicine has received much attention in the medical literature. The use of humor by medical students, residents and medical personnel is not uncommon. Laughter can be therapeutic, for patients and practitioners alike. However, when inappropriately directed towards patients humor can be seen as unprofessional, disrespectful and dehumanizing. How physicians interpret their day-to-day professional experiences, and when and how they use humor is influenced by the perspective that is taken, the social distance from the event, culture and context. Some argue that social and physical distance makes it more acceptable to laugh and joke about patients, but not everyone agrees. To laugh with and not at others is the appropriate use of humor in medicine. To cry against the suffering of others and the injustice behind that suffering and not with them in their agony and frustration is the appropriate response to tragedy.

*“Tragedy is a close-up; comedy, a long shot”*

Buster Keaton was a seminal American actor of the silent film era. His insight into the way in which we approach our world is more than a metaphor and has a particular relevance for those who style themselves as healers and those who profess to teach people to be healers. As our world simultaneously expands to embrace a global vision as a whole and shrinks through the capacity of technology to allow us to observe distant events (both tragic and

comic), it behooves us to think deeply about social distance and its meaning for physicians. When must we laugh off tragedy and get on with the job? When should we cry at the humorous foibles that form part of the human condition? When does emotional distance, however managed, become a form of neglect? What kind of a lens must we teach our students to use as they prepare to confront, on a daily basis, patients – “those who suffer”?

The use of humor and laughter in medicine has received much attention in the medical literature<sup>1,2,3</sup>. In this article, we reflect on the use of cynical humor in medicine and the related implications for medical professionalism, empathy and the development of humanistic qualities in medicine. Our analysis comes from a predominantly Western/North American viewpoint, but can likely be applied within a broader international context. We acknowledge, however, that the appropriate use of humor in various cultures may differ, although there is little published literature on how humor and laughter is used in medical settings in non-Western countries. We also provide some guidance on how medical educators might address matters of empathy and professionalism in the training of students and residents.

Watching a person fall down on America’s Funniest Home Videos – an American “reality” television program featuring accidents and mishaps that ordinary people experience and that are caught on home videos – we laugh easily, even when there is real pain involved. Indeed, a dose of laughter can be good medicine: it can help to reduce discomfort sensitivity<sup>4</sup>, it can be therapeutic<sup>5</sup>, and it is often used as a coping mechanism<sup>6</sup>. But comedy also carries a strong element of Schadenfreude – finding amusement

in the blunders and misfortunes of others. Some brush off guffaws at their misfortunes more easily than others, although it certainly adds to the pain of anyone who is hurting<sup>7</sup>. While the use of derogatory and cynical humor by medical students, residents and medical personnel is not uncommon<sup>8</sup>, when directed towards patients it is unprofessional, disrespectful and dehumanizing<sup>9</sup>. There is disturbing but compelling evidence that medical education and acculturation are partly to blame<sup>10,11</sup>, by tolerating and even fostering a certain detachment<sup>12</sup> and cynicism<sup>13</sup>. Recent moves to encourage the development and evaluation of professionalism in medicine<sup>14</sup> embrace concerns about this issue and the distinction between dark humor about the human condition and the particular observations of those who style themselves as healers.

*Abridged version. Full version available on the department’s website.*

## EDITORIAL

### Some of the facts you probably didn’t know about South Africa

*How well do you really know South Africa? You may know that the only street in the world to house two Nobel Peace prize-winners is in Soweto and that we have three capital cities.*

*Here’s a list of some facts about South Africa that you might not know:*

1) **South Africa is the first, and to date only country to build nuclear weapons and then voluntarily dismantle its entire nuclear weapons programme.**

Nearly three decades after the Cold War ended, there are still 23,000 nuclear warheads in the world. They are held by just nine countries: the US, Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea. Since the end of the Cold War, South Africa has unilaterally dismantled its nuclear weapons and is the only country to do so.

2) South Africa has the world's second most transparent budget (Deloitte, 2012)

South Africa ranks second out of 100 countries for the transparency and accountability of its budget processes, according to the latest Open Budget Index Survey by the Washington-based International Budget Partnership. South Africa scored 90 points out of a possible 100 points in the Open Budget Index report of 2012, standing out as one of only six countries worldwide that releases extensive budget information to the legislature and the public in general.

3) SA is ranked second out of 183 countries for good practice in protecting both borrowers and lenders when obtaining credit for business (World Bank Doing Business Report 2013)

With a range of laws and legal to protect the borrower and the lender, South Africa has consistently performed well against the other 185 countries that took part in the survey.

4) Since the 1940s, South African golfers have won more golf majors than any other nation, apart from the United States (South African Golf Association).

With golfers like Gary Player, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen and Charl Schwartzel, it's little wonder why South Africa has been so successful in the world of golfing. Gary Player alone has won nine majors and 24 PGA Tour wins.

5) South Africa has the second oldest film industry in the world (Set Build)

Only the USA created a film industry before South Africa. In 1898 The Empire Palace of Varieties in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, first screened films of views of Johannesburg taken from the front of a tram and of the President of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger, leaving his house for the Raadzaal. The favourable exchange rate, good weather conditions, varied locations and world-class production facilities have made South Africa a preferred destination for international film, television and commercial producers.

6) South Africa has the most official languages in the world (Guinness World Records)

South Africa has 11 official languages: English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, siSwati, isiNdebele and Tshivenda. Although India has 18 languages recognised by its constitution and can be considered as official, each language is recognised as the official language of a certain area e.g. Kashmiri in Kashmir.

7) The world's first heart transplant was performed in Cape Town, South Africa, by Dr. Christiaan Barnard in 1967.

(TheSouthAfrican.com)



The department welcomes **Florian Grimm**, an elective student from Germany.

He joined the department who joined the department on 24 February and will be with us for a month.

### DURBAN CHILDREN'S HOME GOLF DAY

The Durban Children's home is organizing a Golf Day which is going to be held as follows:

**Date:** Friday, 23 May 2014

**Venue:** Royal Durban Golf Course

**Entry fee:** entry for a four ball team is R2,500 per team. (This is inclusive of green fees, goodie bag, competition fees as well as dinner.) The format will be a Four Ball Alliance - 2 scores to count. For more information contact Thina Hlophe - [thina@dch.org.za](mailto:thina@dch.org.za) - 031 201 1301.

### COLLEGES OF MEDICINE EXAM DATES

**FCA (SA) Part II:** 11- 13 March

**DA (SA) written:** 24&25 March

**DA (SA) Oral:** 1&2 April 2014

**FCA (SA) II Oral:** 5 - 8 May

**FCA (SA) Part I:** 24, 26 & 28 March

### REGISTRAR NOTCH ADJUSTMENTS

All Registrars who started their registrar programme on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 are to complete a verification form (*available in the department*), as well as those registrars who started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January in the previous years and had not completed this form are advised to do so and submit. Further instructions will be given in the department. Please submit to the department completed forms together with the following certified documents: a copy of ID, copy of academic results (or a certificate of completion of relevant exams) and a letter of appointment as a Registrar. Please submit by **07 March 2014**.

### ADVANCED AIRWAY WORKSHOP

**Date:** 24 May 2014

**Time:** 08h30 – 13h00

**Venue:** SMART Centre & Anaesthetics Seminar Room, IALCH

**Enquiry:** Dr R Naidoo  
[rubeshann@yahoo.com](mailto:rubeshann@yahoo.com)

**RSVP:** Hannah at  
[hannahnai@ialch.co.za](mailto:hannahnai@ialch.co.za)

**Please note: Registration is free but limited to 40 candidates only. This workshop is CPD accredited.**



The 2014 Annual SASA Congress is scheduled as follows:

**Date:** 14-19 March 2014

**Venue:** Sun City, Pretoria

For more information visit the website: [www.sasaweb.com](http://www.sasaweb.com)

Please contact Camy if you are attending. To all those who have contacted Camy, *thank you*.

### FCA PART II ANAESTHETIC REFRESHER COURSE

The FCA Part II Refresher course will be held as follows:

**Date:** 17 – 21 June 2014

**Venue:** The Colleges of Medicine of South Africa, Parktown West, JHB

**Enquiries:** Mrs Muriel Ndlovu – 011 933 9335/ [Muriel.Ndlovu@wits.ac.za](mailto:Muriel.Ndlovu@wits.ac.za)

**Register at:**  
<http://www.joburganaesthesia.co.za>

**CPD Points:**  
26 CPD points for the full course and 4-6 CPD points per day.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### UNDERGRADUATE COMMITTEE

**Date:** 04 March 2014

**Time:** 15h00

**Venue:** IALCH (Seminar room)

### CONSULTANT MEETING

**Date:** 04 March 2014

**Time:** 16h30

**Venue:** IALCH (Seminar room)

### COMBINED ACADEMIC

**Date:** 11 March 2014

**Time:** 16h30

**Venue:** L5 Lecture Theatre, MS

### ● RESEARCH MEETING

16h30 Registrar: M Nel

16h45 Registrar:

### ● CLINICAL FORUM

17h00 Topic: General

Consultant: A Dunpath

17h20 Topic: Trauma/Burns

Consultant: A Roos

### ● JOURNAL CLUB

Consultant: K Keerath

Topic: General

17h40 Registrar: Reg 1

17h55 Registrar: Reg 2

### ● REGISTRAR MEETING

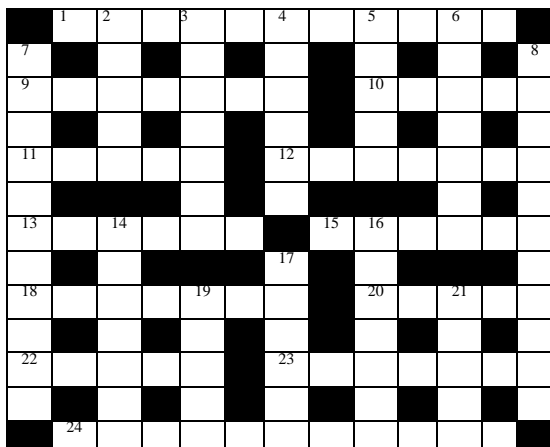
# CROSSWORD

## Across

1. Short price I arranged too early for the record (11)
9. Possibly married someone who thought a lot of another (7)
10. Something lifted from a carol at Christmas (5)
11. Make sure your slip isn't showing (5)
12. It's overlooked by some Moslem women (7)
13. Be agreeable to a sleep perhaps (6)
15. Their function is to secure quiet in class (6)
18. Gets over life's burdens (7)
20. Go easy – Mabel is upset! (5)
22. Girl I care about (5)
23. Coach working on definite lines? (4-3)
24. Photograph monsters in the garden (11)

## Down

2. Dance from Burma (5)
3. Gear to make use of horse-power (7)
4. Stragglers revealed in the street lights (6)
5. Go up to the French peers amorously (5)
6. This strange sum recalled Panama, perhaps (7)
7. Profited a lot out of ship-building (4,1,6)
8. Here speaks a writer for a change (11)
14. Noise or disturbance can be wearing (7)
16. Giving willingly (7)
17. He takes more than usual interest in his work (6)
19. Frank impression (5)
21. The ghost of 8 Down, some say! (5)



# Entertainment

## Reviews:

### Album Review:



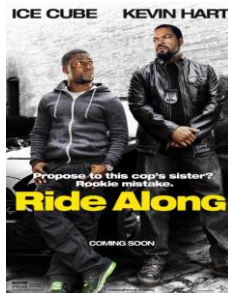
### Adele - "21"

21 is the eagerly awaited follow up to Adele's critically acclaimed, award winning debut album, 19, (both named after her age at the time the songs were written). Renowned for her incredibly unique vocal ability and songwriting, Adele has won two Grammy Awards (Best New Artist and Best Female Pop Vocal Performance) and has sold over 2 million copies of 19 worldwide. This new collection of songs showcases the growth of this incredible artist, who at the very young age of twenty two exhibits the poise of a seasoned veteran. 21 is simply stunning. After only a handful of plays, it feels like you've always known it. It will see Adele become an even greater award magnet come the end of the year, leaving her contemporaries for dust. Genuinely brilliant.

# WHAT TO WATCH



## Ride Along



**Running Time:** 1hr 40 min

**Director:** Tim Story

**Starring:** Ice Cube, Kevin Hart,

Tika Sumpter

**Genre:** Action, Comedy

**Age Restriction:** 13 LV

A security guard joins his prospective brother-in-law, a hardened detective, on a shift along the mean streets of Atlanta and learns that life on the force is no picnic in this action comedy from director Tim Story (Fantastic Four, Think like a Man). Ben (Kevin Hart) longs to marry his gorgeous girlfriend Angela (Tika Sumpter), but before he can propose he must first get the approval of her tough-as-nails brother James (Ice Cube), an Atlanta police detective. To test Ben's mettle James invites Ben on a ride-along through the toughest parts of town. At first James' plans to terrify the younger man go off perfectly, However, when they inadvertently incur the wrath of Atlanta's most feared criminal, all bets are off. John Leguizamo and Laurence Fishburne co-star.

\*\*\*\*\*

# CODEWORD

M	D	I
E	O	A
D	T	N

How many words of four letters or more can you make from the letters shown here? In making a word, each letter may be used once only. Each word must contain the centre letter, and there must be at least one nine-letter word in the list. No plurals or verb forms ending in "s", no words with initial capital, no hyphenated words.

### Target:

Good-25, Very Good 37; Excellent 50 (or more)  
(answers on next page)

# LAUGHING GAS

## Little Johnny jokes

A new teacher was trying to make use of her psychology courses. She started her class by saying, "Everyone who thinks they're stupid, stand up!" After a few seconds, Little Johnny stood up. The teacher said, "Do you think you're stupid, Little Johnny?" "No, ma'am, but I hate to see you standing there all by yourself!"

## Barber Jokes

I have a barbershop in New York City. One day a priest walked in for a haircut. When I finished, I told him not to pay since he is doing G-D's work. The next morning he came by with a nice bouquet of flowers. About a week later, a cop came in, and I told him, "Thanks for you service to society, please don't pay." The next morning, he dropped by with some coffee and donuts. A couple of weeks later a lawyer came in, and after his haircut I thanked him for his service to the justice system and told him, "No need to pay!" The next morning he came by and dropped off another 5 lawyers!

## A Flat tyre

There were four University sophomores taking chemistry and all of them had an A so far. These four friends were so confident that the weekend before finals, they decided to visit some friends and have a big party. They had a great time but, after all the hearty partying, they slept all day Sunday and didn't make it back to school until early Monday morning. Rather than taking the final then, they decided that after the final they would explain to their professor why they missed it. They said that they visited friends but on the way back they had a flat tyre. As a result, they missed the final. The professor agreed they could make up the final the next day. The guys were excited and relieved. They studied that night for the exam. The next day the Professor placed them in separate rooms and gave them each the 100 point exam. They quickly answered the first problem worth 5 points. Cool, they thought! Each one in separate rooms, thought this was going to be easy. Then they turned the page. On the second page was written...  
For 95 points: Which tyre?



**CODEWORD**

Aeon amino amnio anode anomie atom atone  
 atoned dado daemon daimon demo demon  
 diamond diatom diode domain dome domed  
 dominate DOMINATED donate donated  
 done dote doted into iota moan moaned moat  
 moated mode monad monied mote node  
 nomad note noted oaten oddment omen omit  
 toad toadied toed tome tone toned

**CROSSWORD**

**Across:** 1 Prehistoric; 9 Admirer; 10 Latch;  
 11 Erase; 12 Yashmak; 13 Please; 15 Claps; 18  
 Crosses; 20 Amble; 22 Erica; 23 Rail-car; 24  
 Snapdragons.

**Down:** 2 Rumba; 3 Harness; 4 Strays; 5 Ogles; 6  
 Isthmus; 7 Made a packet; 8 Shakespeare; 14  
 Erosion; 16 Leaving; 17 Usurer; 19 Stamp; 21  
 Bacon.

**NEXT SUPER DAMN  
Fri, 28 March 2014**

Contributions to:

Ayanda: [Mthethwaa@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Mthethwaa@ukzn.ac.za)Natashia: [Nzamah@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Nzamah@ukzn.ac.za)Nelly: [Musirinofa@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Musirinofa@ukzn.ac.za)**7:15 FRIDAY MORNING MEETINGS – L5 LECTURE THEATRE, MEDICAL SCHOOL**

DATE	TOPIC	SPEAKER	MODERATOR
28 Feb	Post-operative delirium	Z Moyce	K de Vasconcellos
07 Mar	Anaesthesia and the developing brain	K Allopi	S Reddy
14 Mar	SPECIAL LECTURE	A Theron	
21 Mar	PUBLIC HOLIDAY		

<b>MON</b> 03 March	15h00	<b>FCA PART II TUTORIALS:</b> ENDOCRINE 2  <i>B Biccard</i> <b>CLINICALS</b>  <i>Biccard/Kalafatis</i>	IALCH
<b>TUE</b> 04 March	11h00	<b>PMMH INTENSIVIST TEACHING</b> <b>WARD ROUNDS</b>  <i>D Gopalan</i>	PMMH
<b>WED</b> 05 March	07h00 07h00 07h00 14h30	<b>M &amp; M MEETING: KEH</b> <b>M &amp; M MEETING: IALCH</b> <b>M &amp; M MEETING: PMMH</b> <b>FCA PART I TUTORIALS</b> Pain Physiology Analgesics  <i>S Bechan</i>	KEH IALCH PMMH IALCH
<b>THUR</b> 06 March	07h15 07h15 07h30 15h00 16h30	<b>M &amp; M MEETING: RKK</b> <b>OBSTETRIC ANAESTHESIA</b> Journal Club: DVT prophylaxis in pregnancy and management of such patients for caesarean section  <i>D Pillay</i> <b>KEH ICU M &amp; M MEETING</b>  <b>FCA PART II TUTORIALS:</b> ENDOCRINE 3  <i>Z Farina</i> <b>DA TUTORIALS</b> Pain and Regional Anaesthesia  <i>E Hodgson</i>	RKK IALCH KEH IALCH VC1, MS
<b>FRI</b> 07 March	07h15	<b>FRIDAY MORNING MEETING:</b> Anaesthesia and the developing brain  <i>K Allopi</i>	L5, MS

**2014 DIARY****SASA CONGRESS 2014**Sun City, Pretoria  
14 – 19 March 2014[www.sasaweb.com](http://www.sasaweb.com)**LOCAL CLINICAL COURSE**

09-11 April 2014

**CLINICAL COURSE: DURBAN**

15 – 19 September 2014

**DEPT WEBSITE**<http://anaesthetics.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>**BIRTHDAYS**

Tuesday, 04 March 2014

Nompilo Ntuli

Thursday, 06 March 2014

Clive Daniel

Sanvir Maharaj

Arasha Thotharam

**Thought for the Day!**

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm!"

Ralph Waldo Emerson