

# Q&A with Dr Tickle

David Symons, aka Dr Tickle, is Artistic Director of the Humour Foundation. At this year's ANZPIC, he is exploring the role of humour and connection in medicine.

## How did Dr Tickle come to be?

My background is in theatre. I did a BA at Melbourne University and was super active in student theatre, then I went to the Victorian College of the Arts to train as a theatre director.

After graduating, I was directing, teaching and acting, and I heard about this audition coming up for clown doctors. I thought, wow, I don't really know what that is, but why not jump in and have a go!

So I had an audition and was selected along with a friend. We became part of the original Melbourne team of four clown doctors.

The concept was totally new in this country, so it was a time of great experimentation and curiosity for me because, to be truthful, I didn't know if it was going to work, or even if it was right to bring clowns into kids' hospitals.

But the glorious thing was that it quickly became strikingly obvious that there was a need. The degree of gratitude and thanks given to us as performers was amazing – from parents, from kids, from staff. Kids would be laughing and smiling for the first time in days. I thought, well, that's very clear. There's definitely a role for this kind of work – a non-medical offering in hospitals.

It's not about fixing anything. We're not about that. We look for what is right with a child, not what is wrong. We're about helping to make this moment one worth living for in a way. This moment can be joyful; this moment can be a happy one in a place that's full of anxiety and boredom and fear and distress. And that's what we were bringing to people.

## What would a normal day look like for a clown doctor?

We do a briefing process at the hospital as we put our costumes on, and we do a performance warm-up and check in with your partner. We usually work in duos. It's really important to be prepared and really present, so you leave behind what's happening in the rest of your life. Then you go and visit a whole range of people in different wards and also public areas.

We often go to clinics where kids might be having a painful procedure or even just having blood taken, which some kids are



deeply terrified about. Or it might be as significant as having a whole burns dressing changed which is painful and scary. We help to engage with the kids and make them much less stressed. We're part of the clinic team. We make it easier for the healthcare staff to do their jobs.

You might visit a ward where you'll go from room to room and engage with the individual kids from teeny babies up to 18 year olds. It could be in oncology, mental health, emergency department, intensive care, or just the general wards. Or in pre-op, decreasing a child's anxiety before surgery.

Your goal is to lift their mood or decrease their stress and anxiety, inspire more agency and hope – family members too. It's about connection. I mean, we do try to be funny, but you can't do that until you've connected with someone. If you don't connect first, that's when you're going to make the bloopers.

Then we finish the day and as we're changing back to our normal clothes, we do a debriefing process. We examine the work we've done that day: what worked well, what didn't, what we can learn from that, but also checking in emotionally with each other to see whether either of us might need to get some support – because sometimes we see kids who are dying and they can be kids we've known for a long time, and kids in really difficult situations. That can be distressing for us, so it's good to monitor that.



## What are you going to be talking about at ANZPIC?

We'll be sharing our principles with the attendees about making connection. We were commissioned by the Education Hub at The Royal Children's Hospital to create a workshop to help healthcare staff in their communication, in building rapport. There was a PhD study where they got a student to follow the clown doctors around four to five days a week for a year, just embedded as a learner clown doctor, to observe what was going on.

One of the findings she had was that clown doctors are really good at connecting with people, building rapport, building relationships where people feel seen so they feel at ease. So they have this particular set of skills the hospital thought pediatricians and other hospital staff might benefit from. So since then, we created a workshop about that, and we've been sharing some principles and tips and tricks about how to engage more effectively, more quickly, more productively with kids, families and colleagues. So that's basically what I'll be sharing.

## Is there any one patient you can tell me about that stands out for you?

There's been many. There was a very spirited young girl who was only four or five when we met her. We had a long relationship with her and her parents and we saw her a lot in the hospital, and then in intensive care. She was a great character and we just had fantastic, quite exuberant interactions with her and her parents, really bringing joy to her in her young life. But, unfortunately, she died. I suppose what we try to do is to contribute to making that journey better, actually bringing some beautiful moments to those short lives.

## Do you have a quote or mantra that inspires your work?

The only way round is through.

For me that means you've just got to engage. We call it the Labrador principle: where we keep coming back, wagging our tail until somebody gives us a pat on the head. The clown just fronts up. That's the great thing about the clown. What clowns do is welcome the world in whatever form it's in: the world is dark, the world is bright, it's all those things. But the clown is not scared of the world. The clown goes, 'That's fascinating. Oh my goodness, that's amazing,' and doesn't judge the world, just steps into it. That's a really freeing thing that allows you to be with people because there's no judgment.

## Favourite place to eat for visitors to Melbourne for ANZPIC?

Supernormal in Flinders Lane in the city. Asian fusion food – delicious.

The Australian and New Zealand Paediatric Imaging Conference (ANZPIC) is taking place from 24 to 26 October 2025 at the RCH in Melbourne. Registrations open in July.