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They spare the needle, befriend the child

By David Williamson

Among the most common complaints heard from patients and their families about modern hospitals is that the care seems cold, disjointed and impersonal.

Patients trade their names for numbers, fill out a host of complicated forms and swallow strange medications.

An ever-increasing number of white-clad specialists swoop down on the unsuspecting ill to perform an ever-increasing number of tests, often without explaining their purpose.

If there is a method to the seeming madness, patients and their families may feel like they are the last to know.

A new kind of nurse

Over the past few years, however, a new kind of nurse — known as the nurse clinician — has joined the traditional health care team in this country to try to change all that.

Nurse clinicians say they see themselves as advocates of patients and their families. Their aim is to try to make hospitalization a positive rather than a negative experience by preventing undue anxiety and discomfort for all concerned.

Two nurse clinicians at Duke, Ceeya

Patton and Wendy Bullard in pediatric cardiology, may typify the new breed.

The patients they treat range in age from a few hours to 18 years and suffer from a variety of congenital heart defects. Some of the newborn weigh as little as two pounds.

Each one is a person

"Every single child with a heart problem who comes to Duke is known to us as a person," Bullard said. "We meet patients and parents as early as we can and follow them through the entire hospitalization, from initial diagnosis to visits to the clinic after they've been discharged."

"We're teachers as much as anything," Patton said, explaining how clinicians try to add the skills of the social service worker, the psychologist and the family counselor to their nursing experience.

"Our doctors are very good about drawing diagrams and explaining the heart defects, but after families have had time to think, frequently they'll have 27 questions that we help to answer," she said.

"And if someone is needed to browbeat the system, we won't hesitate to do that,

too," she added. "You know a child hates needles more than anything else in the hospital. If you can reduce the number of times he gets stuck by better coordinating the times when blood is drawn, you've made a friend for life."

Mickey Mouse and Cookie Monster

Bullard said the clinicians take parents and children on extended tours of the catheterization laboratory where diagnostic studies are made, the acute care unit where they will awaken after surgery, the wards, the playroom and any other appropriate areas.

The children meet the people who work there so they won't be strangers.

With Mickey Mouse, Cookie Monster and Raggedy Ann dolls, the nurses demonstrate how such medical equipment as blood pressure cuffs, intravenous feeding tubes and breathing masks will be used.

Both wear colorful uniforms because youngsters are frequently suspicious of white hospital dress.

Chaplains particularly helpful

If a patient has to undergo heart surgery, new friends Wendy or Ceeya will stay with the child for reassurance

until he or she has been put to sleep.

The clinicians also give families frequent progress reports during operations. If a complex procedure is not going well, the nurses try to prepare the parents as gently as possible, sometimes enlisting the services of a hospital chaplain.

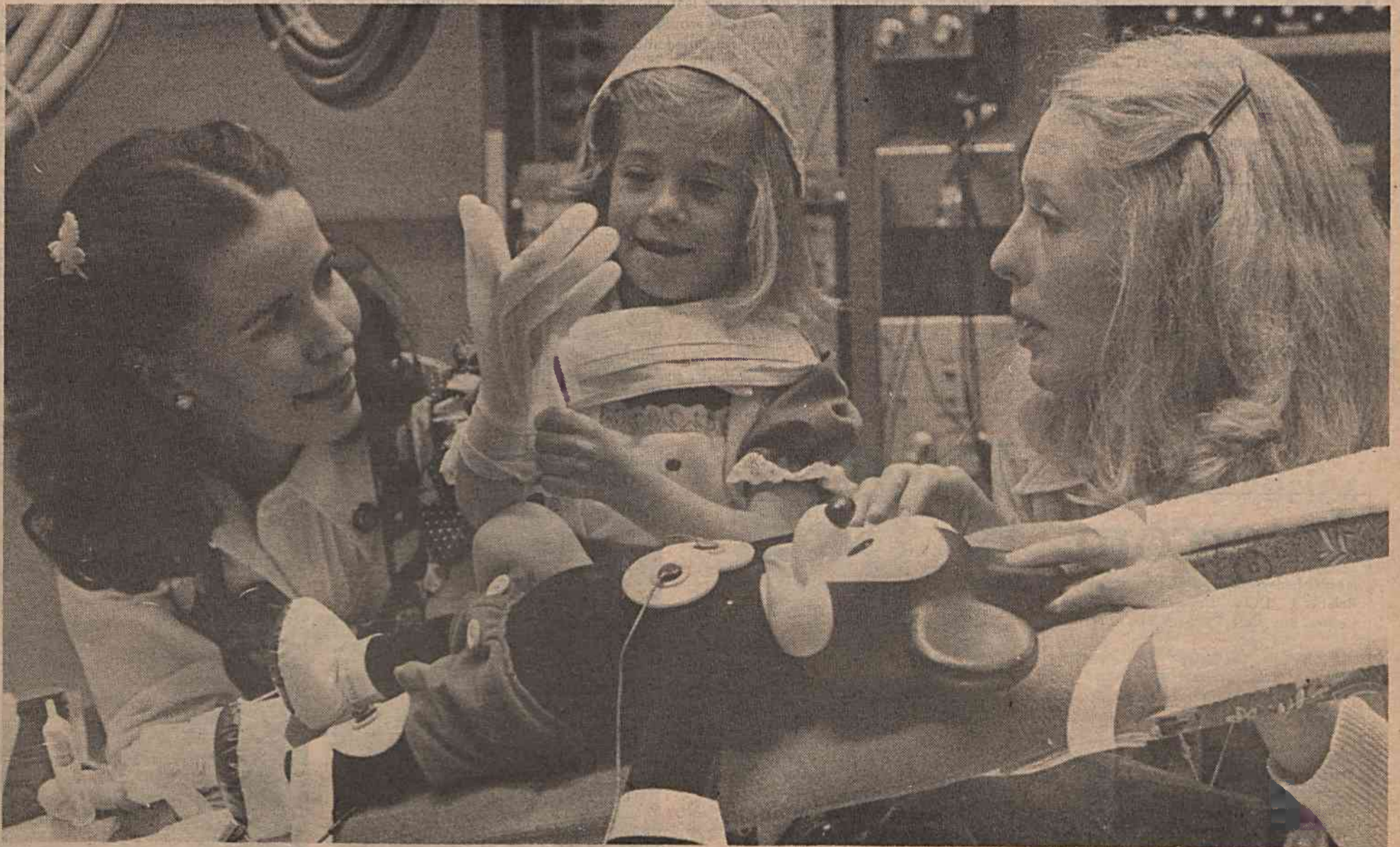
"We find chaplains particularly helpful if a family is using religion for the wrong reason," Bullard said. "Parents sometimes blame themselves for having a child with a heart defect, especially if that child dies. They may say, 'It's God's way of punishing us for not wanting him enough.'"

Unusual strains on the family

Patton says that having a child in the hospital can place unusual strains on the best of marriages and the closest of families. A concerned mother, for example, may ignore her husband and other children so that resentments build up.

"We'll make the families aware that this is a potential problem to guard against," she said. "Brothers and sisters are often included in the preoperative preparation

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REMOVING FEAR FROM LITTLE MINDS—When children are being prepared for heart surgery here, they get acquainted ahead of time with the mysterious equipment and surgical garb they will encounter when they go through preliminary heart catheterization and then the surgery itself.

Pediatric Nurse Clinicians Wendy Bullard (left) and Ceeya Patton even use props like the Mickey Mouse doll here to help their patients. One of them, six-year-old Sharon Smith of Fayetteville, who already has had heart surgery once, checks out the surgical gloves. (Photo by Jim Wallace)