

Palhaços d'Opital: Humanizing Geriatric Care through the Art of the Hospital Clown

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Citation: Rosado J. Palhaços d'Opital: Humanizing Geriatric Care through the Art of the Hospital Clown. *Int J Aging Geriatr Med* 2025, 1(1), 45-49.

Received: 13 November, 2025; **Accepted:** 28 November, 2025; **Published:** 02 December, 2025

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1. Introduction

Population ageing is a global phenomenon that poses new challenges to geriatric practice and to all professionals working in related fields.

Rising life expectancy is accompanied by a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, dementias and social isolation-factors that profoundly affect the emotional and cognitive well-being of older adults.

In this context, there is a need for non-pharmacological, humanizing strategies capable of promoting relational health, affection and dignity in care.

1.1. Older people in Portugal over the last decade: A portrait of ageing in transition

Over the past ten years, the situation of older adults in Portugal has worsened across several dimensions: demographic ageing, increased frailty, growth in “social admissions” and worrying signs of abandonment.

The proportion of people aged 65+ has remained very high (c. 24% in 2024), and the ageing index has risen steadily, reflecting an upward median age.

In terms of health and functional status, national and European studies document substantial prevalences of pre-frailty and frailty among Portuguese older adults-estimates indicate

around 15% living with frailty and much higher percentages in pre-frailty-with direct impacts on dependency, fall risk and the need for continuing care. These conditions render older adults more vulnerable to prolonged hospitalizations and transitions to long-term social care. In parallel, social admissions-patients who remain hospitalized despite being clinically fit for discharge due to lack of adequate social responses-have grown markedly: recent reports identify more than 2,300 recorded cases and an ~8% increase in beds occupied by social admissions within a single year, overburdening the National Health Service and exposing gaps in residential facilities and the long-term care network.

Family abandonment and neglect, documented in sociological studies and academic reports, emerge as compounding factors-stemming from households’ economic fragility, insufficient formal support networks and still-fragmented public policies. Researchers advocate integrated interventions: strengthening primary care, expanding home-based services and increasing residential/step-down solutions to reduce inappropriate admissions and prevent isolation and abandonment.

In sum, over the last decade Portugal has faced a confluence of intense ageing, higher frailty prevalence and growth in social admissions-demanding cross-sector policies, targeted financing and continuous evaluation based on epidemiological and social indicators.

1.2. Palhaços d'Opital, the association that humanizes with smiles

A mission with heart.

Palhaços d'Opital (PdO) is a Portuguese non-profit association, founded on 12 February 2013, that works exclusively with hospitalized adults and older people. The organization was a European pioneer in creating the concept of Elder Clowning, adapting the hospital clown figure to the specific needs of adults-and particularly older adults.

The Association delivers its mission to adults and older people in hospital settings through regular visits to public hospitals, implemented by professionals with specific training (clowns, musicians, actors, etc.).

With more than 1,580 visits conducted and over 7,780 hours spent in hospital environments, Palhaços d'Opital's work constitutes an artistic intervention model with measurable impact on the emotional, social and physiological health of older adults.

1.3. The story behind the red nose

Palhaços d'Opital arose from co-founder Jorge Rosado's dream of becoming a Clown Doctor.

Isabel Rosado, the other co-founder and current CEO, was a primary-school teacher for 25 years. With no prior experience in business or the third sector, she embraced this mission, and together they recognized that hospitals are about far more than children.

Children are the focus of most healthcare clown organizations worldwide, yet older age groups are those most in need of intervention-and where the greatest impact can be achieved.

Palhaços d'Opital's hospital-based intervention seeks to act as a tool for improving health conditions, reducing stress and positively shifting mood. In doing so, it contributes to the humanization of the hospital environment, valuing and dignifying older people.

Palhaços d'Opital innovatively leverages humor and artistic performances to promote well-being, which has led to multiple scientific case studies validating the relevance of its intervention.

1.4. Mission

With the premise of bringing positivity to critical environments-with lightness and joy-Palhaços d'Opital's intervention aims to create moments of abstraction from pain/illness, acting through laughter, humor, joy, music and artistic performances.

"Assuming art as a form of therapeutic intervention, we seek to have a positive impact on the mood and emotional state of those who are hospitalized, in treatment or awaiting consultation, as well as their companions-without forgetting healthcare professionals.

These artistic interventions aim to humanize the hospital space where adults/seniors find themselves, valuing and dignifying older people, thereby providing an environment more conducive to healthier and faster recovery." - Jorge Rosado

Palhaços d'Opital currently has an artistic team of 13 professionals, working regularly across 10 partner hospitals: IPO Coimbra, ULS Santa Maria, ULS Amadora-Sintra, ULS

Matosinhos, ULS São João, ULS Santo António, IPO Porto and IPO Lisboa.

2. Mission and Principles of Intervention

Palhaços d'Opital's mission is to "humanize the hospital environment and the ageing process through art, humor, music, joy and affection."

Professional artists-known as "Palhaços d'Opital"-are trained in theatre, music, improvisation and hospital clowning, and receive specific training in geriatrics, dementias, palliative and end-of-life care, hygiene and hospital ethics, etc.

Each visit is structured along three axes:

- Individualized empathic relationship, respecting the older person's cognitive, emotional and physical state.
- Artistic co-creation-use of humor, singing, narrative and artistic dynamics to restore feelings of happy memories, belonging and identity.
- Interdisciplinary integration with clinical teams, ensuring alignment with therapeutic plans and medical routines.

The intervention model is based on fixed artistic duos that visit the same services weekly, fostering continuity and trust-critical factors for the senior population.

3. Scientific rationale

Elder clowning is now recognized as an emerging psychosocial and artistic intervention in gerontology.

Studies conducted in Canada, Brazil, Portugal and Israel document consistent benefits in three main domains:

a) Emotion and behavior

- Kontos et al. (2016) observed that interactions between clowns and residents with dementia reduce episodes of agitation and increase positive emotional expression.
- Plez et al. (2023) demonstrated that empathic humor facilitates emotional self-regulation and non-verbal communication.

b) Physiology and stress

- Alcântara et al. (2016) reported reductions in blood pressure and heart rate following clown visits in geriatric units.
- Recent studies by the Centre for Innovation in Biomedicine (CIBB-UC), in collaboration with PdO, are testing cortisol and oxytocin biomarkers, suggesting effects on stress modulation and social bonding.

c) Mood and quality of life

- Clinical trials (Low et al., 2013) show improved mood, reduced apathy and increased social interaction after regular cycles of humorous sessions.
- Although not all studies present large-scale statistically significant effects, the qualitative consistency of results reinforces the clinical value of elder clowning as a complementary intervention.

4. Results and Impact in Portugal

Palhaços d'Opital currently operates in 10 partner health institutions/hospitals and has worked continuously since 12 February 2013.

2024 data indicate:

- 4,000+ older adults regularly supported;
- 80% of healthcare professionals report an improved work environment and relationships with patients;
- 75% of family members report increased communication and vitality of their loved ones after visits;
- Internal evaluations show reductions in self-reported anxiety and sadness among hospitalized patients.

The impact also extends to the clinical community: PdO training in “Empathy, Humor and Communication in Geriatrics” has been incorporated into hospital humanization programs across several Portuguese units.

5. Relevance for Indian Gerontology

India faces a rapid population-ageing process-by 2050, more than 320 million people are expected to be aged 60+. In many contexts, elder care is shared among families, communities and institutions with limited resources.

In this scenario, the PdO model offers a replicable, culturally adaptable instrument for humanizing geriatric care, with three strategic components:

- Intercultural training for artists and healthcare professionals, combining traditional Indian arts (music, kathakali, mime, bhava) with principles of therapeutic cloning.
- Low-cost emotional intervention, with measurable psychological impact and no requirement for sophisticated technology.
- Promotion of intergenerational dialogue, valuing elders' wisdom and life stories, aligned with Indian cultural values of respect for ancestry.

Implementing PdO-inspired pilot programs in Indian long-term care institutions could strengthen policies for active ageing and compassionate care.

6. Research Perspectives

We propose collaborative Luso-Indian studies to assess:

- Effects of elder clowning on mood, loneliness and agitation indicators;
- Physiological changes (blood pressure, salivary cortisol, heart-rate variability);
- Caregivers' and healthcare professionals' perceptions of institutional humanization.

The collection of quantitative and qualitative data will help consolidate scientific evidence and contribute to international guidelines on humanizing geriatrics.

7. Conclusion

Palhaços d'Opital's experience demonstrates that humor, affection and artistic presence are clinically relevant instruments with substantial social and therapeutic value.

In a rapidly ageing world, interventions such as elder clowning are not merely complementary: they are essential to the dignity, well-being and emotional health of older adults.

Transposing this model to India, through cultural and scientific cooperation, may open a new chapter in global gerontology-one in which care and humor go hand in hand, to healthy effect.

Palhaços d'Opital | 3rd Impact Assessment

3rd IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1. Assessment via survey of hospitalized older adults

An improvement in well-being following Palhaços d'Opital professionals' performances was perceived by 81.7% of surveyed older adults, with particular emphasis on mood change-feelings of lightness, joy, animation and an uplift in affective state.

Selected narratives from hospitalized seniors corroborate these findings:

“They are a breath of fresh air. Beyond joy, they bring kindness, affection, love, and a word of comfort.”

“In many situations of frailty, they make days more pleasant and fun.”

“They make the day less heavy for those who are admitted, calmer, and they reduce the negative thoughts that a hospital visit or stay can provoke.”

Accordingly, a change in the affective state of seniors-clearly perceived by the individuals themselves-was concluded to result from Palhaços d'Opital's artistic performances.

7.2. Impact assessment among professionals

The methodology also included a data-collection instrument for healthcare professionals present in services (across all hospital units where visits/artistic interventions occurred), with the aim of gauging perceived usefulness of the artistic visits and their relationship to hospitalized seniors' mood.

- 80% agreement (“agree/strongly agree”) regarding the perceived impact of the Hospital Doctors (clown duos).

7.2.1. Specifically: seniors are less bored (83.6%); seniors feel more cheerful and in good spirits most of the time (83.6%); seniors become more communicative with one another and with their surroundings (85%). Respondents also perceived that seniors find it easier to relax (74.7%).

- 74.6% highlighted joy, animation, good spirits, relaxation and the humanization of services as differentiating factors of Palhaços d'Opital's performances. Regarding perceived impact of the clown duos' performances, 74.3% strong agreement was observed for the dimension referring to contribution to the humanization of hospital services.

7.3. Selected testimonies

“On the days they are in my department, there is a noticeable improvement in patients' mood.”

“Problems and difficulties are faced and resolved with greater lightness and serenity.”

“Their presence brings joy to a space associated with suffering.”

“When they are present, time pauses for a moment to forget the harsh reality of the hospital and allow a genuine smile/laughter to emerge-rare in daily life and so beneficial physically and mentally.”

“They are a breath of fresh air and joy that flood the ward, even if only for a few minutes; in those minutes, patients and professionals think about other things, smile and can detach from the complexity of the oncology context.”

7.4. Impact assessment from hospital administrations' perspective

Hospital administrations emphasize the suitability and usefulness of the clown duos' visits and their relationship with seniors' mood. Over 80% of responses validate that the intervention changed seniors' attitude towards being less bored, more cheerful and communicative, enabling a more positive affective state.

Professionals also recognize the importance of these interventions beyond the senior population, acknowledging their impact on professional practice and, consequently, their contribution to the humanization of healthcare services.

According to hospital administrations, Palhaços d'Opital's intervention supports hospitals' missions in delivering humanized care, representing part of their cultural capital and aligning with the Commitment to Hospital Humanization signed in 2019.

The intervention's professional and specialized character is highlighted; the training underpinning the Hospital Doctors and their ability to tailor work to each person are evident. Their presence in hospitals is doubly important: they bring well-being to older patients and exert an indirect impact on healthcare professionals.

"There was great rapport between Palhaços d'Opital and the institution's professionals. We realized that, during the time they were with us, the day became healthier—even if the shift was difficult or we had complex situations. There was always a space for joy."

Given Palhaços d'Opital's strong integration within hospital units, healthcare professionals perceive this as multidisciplinary work and view the project as another service provided by the hospital, complementing care delivery.

7.5. Impact assessment among companions and individuals in waiting areas

Statements recorded >70% agreement ("agree/strongly agree"), recognizing that Palhaços d'Opital's duo made respondents' hospital visits more pleasant (74.5% strongly agree) and that the hospital environment also benefits from these performances (85.1% strongly agree).

"Bless you for your work! You make all the difference in the visits you undertake. It is clear that everyone who is the target of your performance is touched by it and responds positively. You are that part of the treatment that comes in the form of joy."

"People with enormous hearts who restore faith and the will to dream to those who suffer greatly in life and feel alone. Thank you."

"You help us fulfil our mission. One of the values that forms part of the hospital's cultural capital is the humanization of care and, with the playful intervention you carry out professionally and expertly, you are able to improve the mood of patients and of the hospital community. If I had to highlight one aspect, it is that you help us to fulfil our mission, which is to provide care."

7.6. Conclusion

The suitability and usefulness of Palhaços d'Opital in hospital settings are recognized, with a perceived positive impact among healthcare professionals, contributions to service humanization, and improvements in patients' mood.

Palhaços d'Opital's intervention methodology is innovative and disruptive in being purpose-built to work with-and for-hospitalized seniors. It is implemented through visits by Palhaços d'Opital professionals, who bring joy, affection and good spirits to service users (with a core focus on seniors), formal and informal carers, families and healthcare professionals.

Accordingly, both professionals and hospital administrations recognize that artistic interventions affect the hospital environment and contribute to the humanization of healthcare services, validating Palhaços d'Opital's art-based intervention. Perceiving the impact among healthcare professionals, they recognize its suitability and usefulness in hospital contexts, its contribution to humanization, and its positive effect on patients' mood—thereby valuing and dignifying the role of the senior population.

Hospital administrations likewise validate that the clown duo's intervention changes patients' affective state, evidenced directly through observation of interactions and indirectly through healthcare professionals' feedback.

The specific attention devoted to this population makes Palhaços d'Opital a distinctive project that excels in fulfilling its mission to dignify seniors.

8. Practical observations / knowledge gaps

Evidence is stronger in pediatrics; for older/adult populations, large randomized trials are still lacking.

9. References

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3. Sánchez, et al. Anxiety, stress, pain and hormonal markers Results: clowning interventions decreased indicators of stress, anxiety and pain in various pediatric clinical situations; some studies also measured hormonal changes (e.g., cortisol), 2024.
4. Shimshi-Barash, et al. Sleep and length of stay Finding: clown interventions were associated with better sleep quality and shorter hospital stays in children, suggesting effects that may facilitate recovery, 2024.
5. Khoury, et al. study 2025 / recent articles (Nature / Scientific Reports, 2025) Recent evidence indicates that hospital clown programs may reduce length of stay in certain pediatric groups and improve cooperation during treatments (controlled studies published 2024-2025).
6. Randomized trials and digital interventions (e.g., JAMA Pediatrics, 2016) Example: an application featuring "clown physicians" reduced pre-operative anxiety in children in a randomized clinical trial—demonstrating that elements of humor/distraction can be effective even when digitized. (jamanetwork.com)
7. Recent reviews and meta-analyses. General synthesis Multiple reviews/meta-analyses (2020–2024) converge on the most consistent effect being on anxiety and emotional stress; effects on pain, biomarkers and length of stay are promising but heterogeneous across studies, 2024.

8. Interventions in special contexts (COVID-19, adult wards)
Qualitative studies and reports show adaptation of clowning to protective contexts (COVID) and point to emotional benefits in adults, but quantitative evidence in older/adult populations remains limited and calls for larger randomized trials.
9. Proposed mechanisms (theoretical reviews) Physiological hypotheses include stress reduction (lower cortisol), immune system activation via improved sleep and reduced anxiety, and increased adherence/cooperation during procedures-pathways that may translate humor into clinical gains. Various clinical studies have measured stress markers or indirect outcomes (sleep, length of stay).