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Soothing strings

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Harpist Roxanne Ziegler of Rochester doesn't take offense when her listeners fall asleep.

That's a sign that Ziegler has done well, relaxing hospital patients enough to ease pain or anxiety and help them rest.

"This is like ministry," says Ziegler, who plays weekly at Clifton Springs Hospital in Ontario County, in individual patient rooms, in hallways and in group settings such as the surgical recovery room. She stands or sits, plucking Celtic, classical, pop tunes and hymns on her 36-string harp, then rolls the 4½-foot-tall instrument on a dolly to the next stop. She typically visits the emergency department and intensive care unit as well as The Springs health care spa and sometimes the hospital's nursing home.

Live music often surprises patients in a hospital — especially when they're just waking up after surgery. Nurses say patients listening to the music often need less pain medication or are more comfortable between doses.

Musicians play at several local hospitals — including certain parts of Strong Memorial and Rochester General — because of music's potential as a powerful, therapeutic tool. The harp offers a relaxing and widely enjoyed sound.

Recorded music is also used, but live music offers bonuses. It can be customized to specific patients. Also, "I think it makes them feel special that it's a person and not a machine: This is for you," says Nan Hanson, a registered nurse at Clifton Springs' recovery room.

As Hanson spoke, Ziegler sat and plucked a modern classical song. The recovery room was no quiet concert hall. An oxygen mist machine hissed. Machines beeped. Nurses talked as they tended to three patients on rolling beds.

Barbara Miller of Seneca Falls, Seneca County, recovering from toe surgery, enjoyed Ziegler's music. "What a great idea," Miller said later, before departing for home. "It relaxed me."

Inevitably someone asks whether they've died and are hearing harp-playing angels in heaven.

Roy Miller, sitting with his wife, joked, "It's reassuring that it's a harp and not the sound of coal shovels."

Harpist Susan Morehouse plays for patients' families in the L.M. Salmen Surgical Center waiting room at Unity Hospital (formerly Park Ridge), west of Rochester.

Ann Holberton, clinical nurse manager there, says the music is a welcome distraction for anxious relatives waiting for word about the results of an operation.

Sandy Gianniny plays a strapped-on 23-string harp at patient bedsides at Strong Memorial Hospital, both in the pediatric intensive care unit and in palliative care, which includes patients getting bone marrow transplants.

Ziegler and Gianniny are certified music practitioners, accredited through the Music for the Healing and Transition Program in Hillsdale, Columbia County. That program was founded 11 years ago to help palliative-care musicians serve the dying and the chronically ill.

Gianniny says it's rewarding to offer peaceful moments to babies who've just had surgery and to their parents. "I'll say, 'I'm here to relax the baby.'" As she plays lullabies, often a nurse will turn off bright lights and close the curtain.

"You just kind of give them their Gerber baby for a minute," says Gianniny. "Everybody can take a break from decision-land."

She typically plays for about 20 minutes per patient and usually visits them more than once, since she's at Strong twice a week. Patients can always decline. She skips rooms marked "no visitors."

"One time there was a sign saying, 'No visitors except the harp lady,'" Gianniny says.

Gianniny and Ziegler are paid but also donate some of their time.

Ziegler also plays weekly at the Jewish Home in Brighton and monthly at Unity's Edna T. Wilson Living Center in Greece. As time permits, she plays for hospice patients through Unity. Previously she played at Rochester General Hospital's Lipson Cancer Center waiting area.

The staff also appreciates the music, nurses say.

Missy Graham, a licensed practical nurse at Clifton's special services department, where colonoscopies and other procedures are done, says Ziegler's music can change the tone of the place. "The whole place quiets down and calms," she says. At other times, "it gives you a little skip in your step, some of the tunes she plays."

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Use music yourself

Music can help you or a loved one to deal with stress, illness or hospitalization. Bryan Hunter, professor of music therapy at Nazareth College, recommends taking along a CD or mp3 player with music that's familiar and comforting to you. He did so and got through two colonoscopies without medication. "It takes you away from the immediacy of the moment, to another place mentally." You could also make music by playing a drum or instrument or singing to help you relax or cope with stress — but probably not during a colonoscopy.

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