

Fuzzy friends for trying times

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Five-year-old Lamareon Boyd only needs a little help from his mom to pronounce all of the syllables in "medulloblastoma," the medical term for the brain tumor doctors diagnosed him with five months ago. When you ask him what that big word means, he points to his head and talks about the "circle like a golf ball" that was removed from the back of his brain. He shows off a central IV line coming out of his chest where a second round of chemotherapy drugs were injected just last week.

"This is what I got," he says, pointing to the plastic tubes circled around his little body. Then he grabs the stuffed duck he's named Meep-Meep after the sound made by the Road Runner in those old Warner Bros. cartoons. "See what he got?"

Like Lamareon, Meep-Meep has a small IV attached to his body, only the duck's equipment can be removed with a rip of Velcro. Like Lamareon, he's also wearing hospital pajamas. A bandanna covers the top of Meep-Meep's head, while Lamareon has the soft fuzz of regrown hair.



For the past month, Meep-Meep has come along whenever Lamareon visits his doctors at the Alfred I. DuPont Hospital for Children.

But the fuzzy duck is more than just something soft for the youngster to cuddle. He's an educational tool that helps Lamareon understand more about his disease and the way doctors are treating it, said Elizabeth Wood, an oncology social worker at the hospital. The staff uses Meep-Meep and his attachments -- including various IVs and a blood pressure cuff -- to explain to Lamareon how they will be treating him so he knows what to expect.

"If they hear chemotherapy, it's a big word. It's a scary word," Woods said. "But if you bring it down to, 'this is medicine, it's going to work on those sick cells, and this is how the medicine goes through and treats their cancer,' it makes it so much simpler for kids to understand."

Thanks to recent donations by the Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation and the Caitlin Robb Foundation, more kids like Lamareon have another supporter in their battle against pediatric cancer. The two foundations -- each created to raise awareness and support for people with brain cancer -- recently supplied

the hospital with more than 200 of these stuffed toys, dubbed "Chemo Ducks."

The 12-inch ducks are the brainchild of Tennessee mother Lu Sipos, whose son Gabe was just 1 year old when he was diagnosed in 2004 with a rare type of head and neck cancer. During Gabe's treatment at Monroe Carell Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt, Sipos outfitted a stuffed duck with hospital clothes and attachable equipment so Gabe would feel more comfortable during his cancer treatment. The response from other young patients and their physicians was overwhelmingly positive, and before long, the Gabe's Chemo Duck program was created.

In the last five years, the program has spread to more children's hospitals across the country, including the duPont Hospital, which has seen 387 children with cancer this year, Woods said. Sixty-six children have been diagnosed this year, including 18 with a form of brain cancer.

When Chris Grundner heard about the Chemo Ducks from a friend, he wanted to bring the program to Delaware so local kids with cancer have another resource in their battle. Grundner started the Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation as a tribute to his 31-year-old wife, who died from a brain tumor in September 2004. Although his organization focuses on raising awareness about brain tumors, the Chemo Duck program is available to all children with cancer, he said.

"It's a friend. It can go into their treatment," said Grundner, who partnered with the Caitlin Robb Foundation to increase the number of Chemo Ducks that are donated to the hospital. "Nurses use it to show what they're going to do before they actually do it. Kids think, 'If my little buddy the duck can do it, I can do it too.' "

Woods said the early response to the Chemo Ducks has been overwhelmingly positive. Recently, a young cancer patient came into Woods' office with her Chemo Duck. She excitedly told Woods about checking her duck's blood pressure.

"The kids might be hooked up to an IV, and they're able to do those same kind of things with their duck," Woods said. "It's medical play."

That kind of play can make a difference for kids like Lamareon. He was diagnosed last summer after falling off his bike and experiencing heart discomfort so severe his mother, Chineta, took him to the hospital. A CT scan revealed the golf ball-size tumor. He had surgery, followed by radiation and chemotherapy. Long-term, his prospects are good. Up to 72 percent of children diagnosed with medulloblastoma live beyond five years, according to the Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation.

Chineta Boyd said her son's choice of a name for his Chemo Duck suggests he's got a strong bond with the plush animal.

"Meep-Meep, that's what we call him," she said, referring to her son. "He never stops. I always have to slow him down."

ABOUT THE DONORS

The Caitlin Robb Foundation was founded in 1995 in memory of Caitlin, a Tempe, Ariz., toddler who died from neuroblastoma, the most common extracranial solid-tumor pediatric cancer. The foundation raises money to support cancer research at select organizations in Arizona and the Delaware Valley. The foundation also provides financial assistance to families battling pediatric cancer. For more information, visit www.caitlinrobb.org.

The Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation was established by Chris Grundner as a tribute to his wife, Kelly Heinz-Grundner, who died of a grade-four malignant brain tumor in September 2004 at age 31. The foundation raises awareness of brain tumors, the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in children younger than 20. For more information, visit www.khgbraintumorfoundation.org.



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