50 Years of Play in Hospitals: Background History

It was a conversation between Susan Harvey, Save the Children Fund (SCF), and Dr. David Morris, Consultant Paediatrician at the Brook Hospital, Woolwich, which led to the setting up of the first SCF Hospital Play Scheme in 1963. The idea was new territory and there were no guidelines for working in paediatric wards. The timing of this new approach occurred not long after the Platt Report, which led to the gradual lifting of many restrictions on parents’ visiting and staying overnight, and the recognition of the potential psychological damage to children of hospital stays.

SCF dictated the conditions of employment and also supervised and advised the worker. Their policy from the beginning was that this was a pilot venture, which if successful, would request that it be taken over by the NHS whilst continuing to provide supervision and professional support. SCF required a report three times a year, which included the number of children involved in play, some description of the kinds of play activities, any features or events, and one or two case histories. After two more schemes were opened in London hospitals, the first meeting of Hospital Play Specialists took place in Susan Harvey’s house in Hampstead. From these small beginnings, there is now national recognition of the importance of play delivered by paid staff and suitable equipment for all children and young people in hospital.

The NAHPS National Play in Hospital Week 2013 will be celebrating 50 Years of Play in Hospitals and commemorating this important change for children. The event is supported by Starlight Children’s Foundation and one of NAHPS patrons Dr Hilary Cass, president of RCPCH.