

# Chez nous

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Hôpital de Montréal  
pour enfants  
Centre universitaire  
de santé McGill



Montreal Children's  
Hospital  
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# iMatter survey: the results are in!

In December 2024, the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) reached an exciting milestone by launching its first-ever hospital-wide engagement survey: iMatter!

This initiative was designed to listen to what you have to say, understand staff morale and engagement, and highlight key areas such as:

- Access to information
- Opportunities for training and development
- Inclusion in decision-making
- Fair treatment and respect in the workplace
- Workplace safety

## What happens next?

Managers and division directors are sharing survey reports with their teams. If your team had fewer than five respondents, a team-specific report wasn't generated so that participants' confidentiality can be maintained. However, you can still ask your manager to review the departmental report for broader insights.

We're thrilled to share that **922 of you participated** — thank you for making your voices heard! The feedback so far looks positive, and the MCH Engagement and Experience Index, a summary score generated by the

iMatter results, is already giving us valuable insights. Of course, this is just the beginning! Your input has also highlighted opportunities to improve the survey and we're excited to make the process even better in the future.

## Looking ahead, here's what's in store:

- Over the coming weeks, we'll focus on debriefing and creating action plans at every level of the organization. While team-specific updates won't be shared broadly, we'll keep you posted on department-wide and organizational progress.
- **A new workplace civility communications campaign is coming soon!** This initiative will help us foster a more positive and respectful environment for everyone.

Thank you for your collaboration and for helping us celebrate our successes while tackling challenges. Your voice matters and together we're shaping a brighter future for the MCH.

*Dr. Tanya Di Genova*

Associate Director of  
Professional Services  
Montreal Children's Hospital

*Cindy McCartney*

Associate Director of Nursing  
Montreal Children's Hospital and  
Women's Health Mission of the MUHC





# Virtual reality: a new tool to help patients relax during procedures

By Maureen McCarthy

**F**or several months, a pilot project using virtual reality (VR) has been underway at the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) that aims to help children cope with the anxiety that comes with having tests.

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► Above: The team leading the virtual reality project. From l. to r.: Denise Kudirka, Advanced Practice Nurse, Emergency Department, Carla Farnesi, Project Coordinator, Afifah Chaudhry, Child Life Specialist, and Stéphanie Lepage, Nursing Educator, Surgical Unit.



► Félix is the first patient who tried virtual reality at the MCH. He is accompanied by his mother Natacha during a visit to the hospital in December.

Afifah Chaudhry, Child Life Specialist, Stéphanie Lepage, Nursing Educator, B8 Unit, and Denise Kudirka, Advanced Practice Nurse, Emergency Department, spearheaded the project which has already benefited nearly a dozen patients.

Using virtual reality in the clinical setting is something Afifah had been interested in for a while and she started exploring ways to bring the technology into practice while supporting patients during their medical procedures.

Denise had also been researching the use of VR for patients, reviewing the existing evidence-based literature extensively. She had invited Prof. Argerie Tsimicalis, clinical researcher at Shriners Hospitals for Children Canada, to present

at an MCH nursing community of practice session on her findings using VR with patients at the Shriners.

According to Stéphanie, who works on the MCH Surgical Unit, "During the presentation, we saw right away that it could be another way to help children experience less pain during procedures."

When Afifah and Denise met at a colleague's retirement party they decided to merge their efforts to see if they could move the idea forward. Along with Stéphanie and Carla Farnesi, the team's Project Coordinator, they began the pilot project.

Stéphanie says that the people from the Shriners shared their protocols, which

was very helpful in getting the MCH project off the ground. The team met regularly to advance their objectives. Denise wrote the protocol and the team prepared the teaching documents to train staff on incorporating VR as a tool for patients.

There are currently three Oculus Go VR headsets being used at the MCH, which were donated to the Child Life Department about two years ago. In exploring the possibilities of using them, Afifah discovered that many different companies have developed software geared towards hospitalized children.

Afifah quickly became, in her words, the "information technology person". She learned how to load the software for use in the headsets, which are currently available to children on the B8 and B9 Units, and in the Hematology-Oncology Day Treatment Centre. All three headsets have the same games and programs, and several Child Life specialists and nurses have been trained on how to use the devices and guide patients through the process.

The headsets are used during mildly painful procedures such as intravenous insertions, dressing changes, port access (placement of a small device under the skin to facilitate access to a vein) and blood tests.

### **TRAINING AND PLANNING**

As part of the staff training conducted by Afifah and Stéphanie, topics covered include: why VR is used as a distraction tool for patients during medical

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procedures, understanding whether or not a patient is a good candidate for using the device, how to place the patient, how to keep them engaged and what to do if the child wants to remove the headset at any point.

Each session with a patient starts with working through a plan with the child and their parents before the child puts on the headset. The pilot project team are also compiling data from patients, to ask about the effects of the VR experience both before and after on their levels of pain and anxiety.

### A DISTRACTION TO RELIEVE STRESS

Ten-year-old Félix was the first patient at the MCH to try the Oculus Go when it was suggested by Afifah, his Child Life specialist. He was diagnosed last spring with a rare condition known as Langerhans cell histiocytosis, an abnormal proliferation of Langerhans cells that can damage tissue or can cause lesions to form in one or many places.

After hospitalization and treatment, Félix is now followed closely by his doctors in the Hematology-Oncology Division and frequently has blood tests to monitor his condition.

“When they first suggested I try the VR headset, I wasn’t sure,” he says. “I was a little afraid and stressed when I first put it on, but by the time they inserted the needle for my blood test I didn’t feel a thing.”

The second time he used the headset at his next blood test, he was already more relaxed before it began.

The Child Life specialist or nurse helps guide the VR for the patient, asking them what they see in the game, if they’re getting their points and encouraging them to be engaged in the space they’re in. There’s also a relaxation game on the Oculus Go which puts them in a nature setting with waterfalls and is designed to help them breathe and be calm.

### NEW HORIZONS AHEAD

As the program is further developed, one of the goals is to keep patients interested in using the VR technology, especially those who will be using it regularly. Afifah has secured two MetaQuest 3 VR devices and is in the process of programming them to have more immersive experiences like traveling in another country or being at

a concert, as well as newer interactive games.

The team is also working on making the teaching available to other professionals throughout Quebec on the Environnement numérique d’apprentissage provincial portal.

Félix’s mother Natacha Thibault says the VR headsets have a ripple effect for parents. “Seeing how it benefits your child, how their pain and anxiety are reduced really helps us as parents too,” she says. “Plus, there’s less hesitation when it’s time to go for the next test.”

Félix has some useful advice for other children. “I really liked it. It helps you concentrate on something other than the blood test. You just have to ask for it to see for yourself!” ❄️

*Any staff members who are interested in receiving training on using VR headsets can contact: [afifah.chaudhry@muhc.mcgill.ca](mailto:afifah.chaudhry@muhc.mcgill.ca), [stephanie.lepage@muhc.mcgill.ca](mailto:stephanie.lepage@muhc.mcgill.ca) or [denise.kudirka@muhc.mcgill.ca](mailto:denise.kudirka@muhc.mcgill.ca).*

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Editor: Christine Bouthillier  
Contributors: Caroline Fabre, Maureen McCarthy  
Design: Vincenzo Comm Design inc.  
Photography: Christine Bouthillier, Afifah Chaudhry, Caroline Fabre, Spencer Halickman, Maureen McCarthy, Frank Pavan

To submit story ideas or texts to *Chez nous*, contact the Communications office at ext. 24307 or send an email to [mchpr@muhc.mcgill.ca](mailto:mchpr@muhc.mcgill.ca).

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*On the cover:*  
Ana Lereu (r) takes a blood sample while Félix uses a virtual reality headset.

*Cover photo:*  
Afifah Chaudhry

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# Cured of his serious OCD after a few therapy sessions

By Christine Bouthillier

**R**obert\*, 14, had been suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) for years, with nothing working to help him get rid of it. At his worst, he could spend up to 12 hours a day performing OCD-related rituals. After only a few therapeutic interventions at the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH), he is now completely cured.

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► Above: Robert, accompanied by his parents.

Robert was diagnosed with autism without intellectual disability when he was six years old. He also has a coordination disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. However, these multiple diagnoses were well controlled by medication.

Everything changed with the pandemic. The uncertainty associated with the emergence of an unknown disease, COVID-19, combined with the death of his dog in 2021, plunged Robert into a period of significant stress.

“He washed his hands every 15 minutes, even if he didn’t leave the house. He would come home from school, immediately take a shower and change all his clothes,” says his mother, Chantal\*.

### INVASIVE GESTURES

Gradually, OCD-related rituals took up more and more space in his life, to the point of occupying 90 per cent of his time, greatly hindering his development. Taking antidepressants had no effect.

“He had to go up and down the stairs several times, open and close the refrigerator. If he was interrupted, he had to start all over again. He believed that something would happen to him if he didn’t perform the ritual. If he couldn’t do the ritual physically, he would do it in his mind, which meant he couldn’t concentrate at school,”

adds Dr. Eva-Flore Bui-Xuan, Head of the Psychiatry Department at the MCH, who followed Robert.

The teenager would get very angry if he was prevented from carrying out a ritual, or if certain words were spoken, such as “diaper” or “toilet”. He also had positive obsessions, thinking that he would become rich if he engaged in particular rituals.

“At school, I’d stay behind the door once I got in. I’d ask the special education technician to lie down on the carpet and she’d do it,” recalls Robert.

Dr. Bui-Xuan explains that people often try to accommodate the OCD to reduce the person’s stress, but this actually amplifies it.

“I would walk on the yellow line in the middle of the street or lie down in the street,” adds the teenager.

As a result, his parents stopped walking in the neighbourhood. Relatives no longer wanted to visit them either, finding the situation too difficult. In the spring of 2023, Robert was suspended from school for a reason unrelated to the OCD.

“We couldn’t do any activities outside the house, so this isolation didn’t help us fight the OCD,” points out Daniel\*, Robert’s dad.

### THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Robert received help from a psycho-educator and a social worker at his CLSC. He was also briefly hospitalized at the MCH, because the OCD was so intense that professionals thought he might be in psychosis. He was then taken into care at the MCH and referred to Dr. Bui-Xuan in 2023.

“From the very first meeting, we started psychoeducation. I explained to him what an OCD was, that it’s like our brain playing tricks on us. It’s important not to listen to what it says, but to think more about realistic thoughts,” says the psychiatrist.

Robert immediately felt better. He began to realize that his rituals and fears had no real basis.

“Understanding what was happening to him solved 50 per cent of his problem,” says Chantal.

With the help of his parents, the teenager immediately put a plan in place to stop indulging in his rituals. His parents helped him identify the moments when “his brain was playing tricks on him”. The family established a routine of activities all night before bedtime to keep Robert busy and prevent the OCD from taking all the space. He also received rewards when he managed to stop rituals.

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▶ Dr. Eva-Flore Bui-Xuan, Head of the Psychiatry Department at the MCH, helped Robert overcome his OCD.

“Understanding OCD really made a difference for Robert. We were also reminded of the importance of not accommodating OCDs, even if preventing Robert from carrying out his rituals would sometimes make him aggressive,” says Robert’s mother.

The teenager finally understood that his loved ones were not against him when they tried to prevent a ritual, but rather that they were all together against the OCD.

*\*Names have been changed at the patient’s request.*

**BETTER DAYS**

After a few therapy sessions, following a calendar, Robert was gradually exposed to the words that made him angry, in order to desensitize him. He was also given tips on how to relax when he felt anxiety building up: take a bath, go for a walk, etc.

Since then, the OCD has completely disappeared. “I still have to remind myself to push it away occasionally,” says Robert.

His parents keep an eye out for signs that the OCD might return, which is possible in times of stress.

“The therapy has allowed the antidepressants to work. After a year, we will try to gradually reduce the dose until we take them off completely,” says Dr. Bui-Xuan.

Robert is now back at school full-time. With no OCD taking up all the space, he can finally enjoy life. ❁





## A bleu-blanc-rouge celebration at the MCH!

By Caroline Fabre

**O**n December 11, the Montreal Canadiens hockey players brought the spirit of the holidays to the Montreal Children's Hospital, delighting young patients and their families with their annual visit. This cherished tradition, now in its 59<sup>th</sup> year, began in the 1960s and has become a beloved event that patients and staff eagerly anticipate.

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► Above: The Canadiens players visited all the hospital units, including the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Players made their way through the different floors at the hospital, delivering gifts, signing autographs and sharing uplifting moments with the children and their loved ones. For those in isolation, the Canadiens participated in an online hockey stick decoration workshop, ensuring everyone could take part in the festivities.

“I’m really glad we had the opportunity to come out, spend a bit of time with these kids and bring smiles to their faces.

Seeing some of the children that we had the privilege to meet, being excited and having enough energy to get out of bed to come and see us for a picture or an autograph was pretty inspiring,” says Josh Anderson, winger for the team.

Events like this foster the creation of cherished memories for everyone involved. We thank the Canadiens for their ongoing dedication and for making this holiday season extra special for the patients at the Montreal Children’s Hospital. ❁



► Players share a joyful moment with a patient and her mother in the Hematology-Oncology Unit.

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► Players distributed gifts throughout the hospital, much to the delight of our young patients.





# The MCH in festive mode

By Caroline Fabre

Over the past couple of months, the halls of the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) were buzzing with excitement and joy. From creative activities and live performances to special guests and themed events that made our patients, their families and our staff really smile, we showed that even in a hospital, fun has its place.

The HMCS Donnacona Royal Canadian Navy reserve orchestra brought festive spirit to both patients and staff at the MCH. Visiting various floors, they shared their musical talents by playing lively melodies, creating moments filled with joy and magic.



The MCH had the privilege of hosting musicians from the Orchestre Métropolitain for a captivating performance. A string quartet visited several floors of the hospital, playing timeless holiday classics that warmed the hearts of our little patients, their families and our staff.



Last November, the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal spent time with a number of young patients at the MCH. Together with colleagues dressed as Spider-Man and Deadpool, a member of the Groupe tactique d'intervention rappelled down the hospital's façade, offering a thrilling show to patients and staff.



All around the MCH, there was plenty of colour, glitter and festive flair as our staff embraced the holiday spirit with their best (and ugliest) holiday sweaters!

The MCH celebrated the holiday season in style with an event organized by the Quality of Life at Work Committee. Staff members enjoyed delicious mocktails and pastries while being treated to a concert by the HMCS Donnacona orchestra. Thanks to the MCH Foundation who funds the committee.

