

Babes in Toyland— Medical Style

by Jerry Klein

TO A WHITE frame house in Meadville, Pa., each day there comes a pitiful parade of children stricken by multiple sclerosis, palsy, polio, dystrophy, and other crippling diseases.

But as they enter the house, they forget their pain and their faces light up. For this house is a fairyland full of colorful toys: a fire engine, jet plane, sailboat, steamboat, and rocking swan. And the best thing of all is that playing with these toys actually helps the youngsters to recover!

Each toy is designed so the child has an incentive to play with it, and while playing with it, he receives a therapy treatment. Each plaything contains a hidden device that gives the child a cyclo-massage—a circular stimulation of the body.

The toy steamboat, for example, has pedals which pump soap bubbles up the smokestacks. While a girl forces her legs to move the pedals, she is receiving cyclomassage through the seat and back of her chair.

Similar massage is given a boy as he pretends to be a jet pilot. Meanwhile, he's also encouraged to exercise his arms to operate the toy machine gun which is mounted in front of the "cockpit."

This curious combination of healing with play was the idea of two men, Dr. Edward Connor of Meadville and Owen K. Murphy of nearby Adamsville. In 1954 Dr. Connor was searching for a way to help crippled children of the area, many of whom had been rejected by various institutions as beyond help. As head of the Niagara Manufacturing Corp., Murphy was making electrical devices used by hospitals to administer cyclotherapy.

But because of their handicap, crippled children often were so afraid of such mechanical equipment that they derived little benefit from the treatment. Simultaneously, Murphy and Dr. Connor realized that this problem could be overcome by hiding the equipment inside playthings and associating massage with fun.

In a few months, they were ready to test their idea in the Fairyland Clinic. No profit was to be involved, treatment would be free, and no donations would be accepted.

Today, after two years of testing, the two men have no final answer on the role cyclotherapy eventually may play in the treatment of crippled children. But such massage does seeming wonders in many cases, and Dr. Connor says preliminary results have encouraged continued research.

He cites the case of a seven-year-old girl so severely handicapped she would frequently fall, could not climb stairs alone, and had difficulty feeding and dressing herself. Her speech was poor, she tired easily, was depressed and unable to attend school.

After six months of cyclotherapy, this girl attends school regularly, her speech is much better, and she can dress and feed herself. She goes up stairs unaided, has better control of her muscles, and is cheerful. She's also four pounds heavier and almost two inches taller!

Along with his young charges, Dr. Connor takes cyclomassage every day—and it's not purely in the interests of scientific research; for the doctor was himself stricken by multiple sclerosis four years ago. Blind and paralyzed, he fought his way back from the shadows and vowed that he would someday help others do the same.



Clay, slates, and other toys help develop manual dexterity (above).

Swan (right) is rocked by electricity, providing therapy and fun.

Doctors call boat's motion "cyclo-massage." To kids, it's just wavy.

