



Savanna Welch, 2, of Lisbon, and her mother, Stefanie, enjoy a visit from the Easter bunny on Sunday morning at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids. The Linn County Sheriff's Office worked with The Easter Bunny Foundation to visit hospitalized children.

Chris Earl/KCRG-TV9

A holiday in the hospital

Characters visit kids to brighten Easter

By Chris Earl
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CEDAR RAPIDS

— If you are in a hospital wing and come across three members of a local sheriff's department, in full uniform and waiting outside a room, you may wonder what is going on inside.

At least on Easter Sunday, it's actually good news.

"We appreciate the fact that people came out to visit him," Flora Callahan said of her son, T.J. Ross, 12, a Type I diabetic. "He has been here for two nights now."

"It's actually cool because when I'm here, I don't have as many visitors," said T.J., a seventh grader at Roosevelt Middle School in Cedar Rapids, after the Easter bunny and McGruff the Crime Dog paid him a vis-

it at St. Luke's Hospital on Sunday morning.

Callahan described her son as "my hero" because of the constant insulin shots he endures to maintain his health.

Linn County Sheriff Brian Gardner walked the halls of St. Luke's and Mercy Medical Center, flanked by the costumed characters and deputies Mike Haeder and Veni Cassell. Gardner said the Orlando-based Easter Bunny Foundation made the visits possible.

"The Easter Bunny Foundation said they would be willing to give the costumes and the plush toys if we took the time and went to the hospitals," he said. "Being stuck in a hospital isn't terribly enjoyable, so we're doing our part to make it a bit more pleasant."

The visitors spent time with older children like T.J., as well as newborns who hadn't yet left the

hospital.

"They stopped in and asked if they could stop by," said Jessi Sweet, mother of twin boys born two days earlier at St. Luke's. "It will be something to show them when they get older."

The group of law officers and costumed characters led to a few double takes as the caravan made its way between the Cedar Rapids hospitals. Plush ears dangled out of opened car windows.

"We are traveling en masse," Gardner said as the deputies led the characters from stop to stop because of their cumbersome feet and paws. "We make sure each of the characters has a handler."

After finishing off another run of visits at Mercy, Gardner summed up the morning.

"This is just one of those things that seems to be the right thing to do."

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