

Comics & Medicine

From Private Lives to Public Health

The Department of Art as Applied to Medicine recently hosted the 2014 Comics & Medicine Conference at Johns Hopkins.

The conference examined the broad intersection of the comics medium and the field of medicine.

My name is Lydia Gregg, chair of this year's conference and a medical illustrator at Johns Hopkins

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The conference, now in its fifth year, gives a unique new community of health care professionals, academic scholars, comics enthusiasts, artists and various stakeholder groups a chance to come together at a truly interdisciplinary gathering.

Our 235 attendees shared ideas and forged new collaborations, celebrating the medium for its unique ability to express and communicate medical subject matter.

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The theme of this year's conference, *From Private Lives to Public Health*, aimed to highlight the relationship between comics, personal health narratives and public health issues, such as barriers to health care and the stigma of illness.

The theme emphasized a continuum between public health issues and personal health narratives. This means much more than just patient education. Here's a ***small sampling*** of the amazing range of perspectives the community offers.

PATIENT PERSPECTIVES

For example, the transition from what we think of as being a "normal," healthy person to being a patient can be very difficult to process. Comics have a unique ability to express this transition through a combination of text and images.

Graphic novels like Ellen Forney's *Marbles* have helped destigmatize mental illness through her personal portrayals of what it's really like to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Best-selling works like Forney's could have a wider impact on public health issues by helping to change broadly held attitudes about the treatment of stigmatized illnesses.

CAREGIVERS

Comics like Joyce Farmer's *Special Exits* have helped share the experience of

confronting illness from a new angle: through the caregiver's viewpoint.

HEALTH CARE WORKERS

Many conference attendees were health care workers writing about issues they confront in practice rather than simply internalizing these experiences. Doctors like Ian Williams have made captivating comics on this topic such as *The Bad Doctor*.

MEDICAL EDUCATION

This reflective power of comics has been implemented to help process the first experiences of nursing students and junior physicians as care providers.

MK Czerwiec teaches comics to nursing students at Northwestern University in Chicago. Creating these comics could also help students better understand the patient perspective.

PATIENT COMMUNICATION

It can be very difficult to verbally communicate complex medical information to patients in a clinic. In stressful situations, such as during informed consent, the information can go in one ear and out the other.

Comics can be a fantastic means of communicating difficult-to-understand information to patients and their families through the use of narrative and imagery.

COMICS ARTISTS AND MEDICAL ILLUSTRATORS

Medical illustrators and comics artists will often put their unique skill set to use working with doctors and patient to create comics to communicate medical information for patients.

Here at Johns Hopkins I've teamed up with Dr. Monica Pearl to create a comic for kids with retinoblastoma that uses engaging characters to help explain the treatment.

HEALTH COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

This approach has been used to make some public health information more engaging and easier to understand.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Comics have also been used as an engagement tool. The Society for Nutrition Education and Health Action has held workshops with members of the community in Mumbai to express their health concerns in comic form as part of the Dharavi Biennale and art for health advocacy project.

They then took to the streets to share the comics with the greater community.

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This exciting new community continues to grow and surprise with its wide variety of disciplines and interests. Visit graphicmedicine.org for more information.