

Comics give health care experiences meaningful commentary

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The arts have long been used as cultivators of reflection and storytelling about health and health care. Like novels, short stories, painting, sculpture and film, comics can convey poignant stories, deliver analytical depth, and offer interpretive alternatives to text-based ethical inquiry.

Many readers might be surprised that comics are being taught in medical school. People are familiar with the historical association of comics with juvenile entertainment or underground movements, but comics are no longer only for children and fringe subcultures. The art form has evolved, and modern-day comics have power to visually represent and comment on health care and health care experiences, guide patients' and clinicians' learning, and approach consideration of values in health care not only ethically but aesthetically.

This month's *AMA Journal of Ethics*® features numerous perspectives on graphic medicine—the intersection of comics and general health care discourse—and ethics, specifically.

Take a moment to consider this question: Is it appropriate for psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to give patients comics to help them understand their diagnosis?

- Yes, as long as the comic conveys accurate health information.
- Yes, but only after asking the patient if he/she is interested in the comic.
- No, unless a patient specifically requests a graphic explanation.

Give your answer and find responses to this question in the February issue of the *AMA Journal of Ethics*.

Articles include:

“Representations of Patients’ Experiences of Autonomy in Graphic Medicine.” When used in introductory medical ethics courses, graphic narratives about patients’ experiences of autonomy can serve as a learning tool, giving trainees insights into making diagnoses and recommending treatments. Graphic medicine can also uniquely illuminate aspects of patients’ experiences of

autonomy differently than other genres.

“Teaching Confidentiality through Comics at One Spanish Medical School.” Physicians at the University of Zaragoza in Spain developed an innovative way to teach the concept of confidentiality to medical students, which was tested by comparing the use of customized comics with more traditional methods. They found that using comics increases class participation and students’ self-awareness of learning while maintaining the same academic results.

“How Should We Judge the Ethics of Illustrations in Graphic Medicine Novels?” The illustrations in a graphic novel should be judged in the context of the entire work. Judging a work on its emotive effects and the values it expresses, we can consider the ways a graphic novel represents the experience of illness, disability, or injury.

“Roles of Graphic Pathographies in Clinical Training.” Although graphic pathographies have recently been recognized as playing an important role in medical care, they have not been formally incorporated in many medical school curricula. Health professionals and educators should understand when, why, and how to use graphic pathographies with the goal of enhancing medical education and patient care.

In the journal’s February podcast, Brian Fies, author of the graphic novel “Mom’s Cancer,” and Phoebe Potts, author of “Good Eggs,” discuss the unique power of graphic medicine to communicate complex issues in health care. For those looking for additional information about applying graphic medicine in educational and clinical settings, a discussion in the AMA Journal of Ethics forum touched on those subjects.

Submit manuscripts and artwork

The journal’s editorial focus is on commentaries and articles that offer practical advice and insights for medical students and physicians. Submit a manuscript for publication. The journal also invites original photographs, graphics, cartoons, drawings and paintings that explore the ethical dimensions of health or health care.

A look ahead

In March, *AMA Journal of Ethics* will focus on global reproductive health ethics in the 21st century. April’s issue will examine ethical considerations in plastic and reproductive surgery. Sign up to receive email alerts when new issues are published.