

Picture This – Medical Comics as an Impetus

Report from the Project “Art – Action – Attitude” at the Medical University Vienna, Austria

ANDREA PRASCHINGER, RUTH KUTALEK, RUTH KOBLIZEK & EVA K. MASEL

Be aware!

Providing medical care on a daily basis is a challenging task for all healthcare professionals. In multidisciplinary teams, patients - some of whom are critically ill - are treated in difficult circumstances. Not only do these teams have to keep patients and their families informed about the progress of their cases, but they also need to remain resilient. This means that maintaining high standards is crucial. In such situations, there is a need to discuss topics that are difficult to articulate. In other words, it is important to address the unspeakable or unspoken (MASEL *et al.* 2020a), which may involve situations of excessive demands, disgust, helplessness, or death. Such circumstances often require a conversation to be initiated and space to be created for discussing challenging topics (CZERWIEC *et al.* 2017).

Be flexible!

Graphic medicine, which can be found at www.graphicmedicine.org, is a powerful form of communication that utilizes visual imagery to convey ideas and raise awareness about important issues. While it may seem like a simple approach that only requires paper and pencil, it has the ability to convey complex information in a way that is often more easily understood than traditional text-based explanations. By tapping into the power of pictures, graphic medicine is able to address topics that may be difficult to express through words alone, making it an effective tool for healthcare professionals and patients alike (as shown in Figure 1). In fact, the use of Medical Comics (MC) and drawings has a long-standing history in the medical field, with numerous benefits including increased accessibility for those with poor reading or language skills. The popularity and use of



Fig. 1 Example of a medical comic; copyright of Barbara Pirker.

graphic medicine continues to grow, with a wealth of scientific research supporting its effectiveness over the past two decades (CALLENDER *et al.* 2020).

Let art be the answer!

Clinicians must see and hear each patient in the fullness of his or her humanity in order to minimize fear, to locate hope (however limited), to explain symptoms and diagnoses in language that makes sense to the particular patient, to witness courage and endurance, and to accompany suffering. (HEATH 2016:1)

Medicine is challenging - for everyone! Medical Humanities help us to classify the challenges of everyday life, to find answers and to work out solutions - this already in the training phase. The goal is to create so-called "Rounded Doctors" (WEATHERALL 1994). But also medical staff, as well as patients and their relatives, benefit from this.

Effective communication in medicine requires the ability to convey knowledge and experiences in a clear, flexible, and empathetic manner. In this context, the use of MC can be particularly valuable in presenting diverse perspectives on challenging situations and promoting the development of problem-solving skills. By using visual storytelling, graphic medicine can capture the attention of viewers and provide a platform for reflection. This approach is especially helpful when dealing with difficult, challenging, or stressful conditions, as it allows individuals to engage at their own pace, use their imagination, and learn from others. Through the use of MC, viewers are provided with a visual representation of medical situations, including the unpleasant aspects of everyday medical life, such as coping with hopeless situations and delivering unfavorable news. This "behind the scenes" view of medical practice allows individuals to connect with the emotions of the story and encourages them to take a step back and focus on the situation at hand. Ultimately, graphic medicine provides a space for the unspeakable and unspoken to be expressed, offering individuals an opportunity to share their experiences and connect with others in a unique and meaningful way.

By utilizing MC and medical picture stories, medical professionals can improve their communication skills and foster a greater sense of empathy and understanding within their practice. The visual language helps to depict serious topics and require contemplation similar to a diagnostic process, allowing viewers to perceive information, address gaps, and interpret conclusions.

But who?

The Teaching Center of the MedUni Vienna, in collaboration with the Division of Palliative Medicine, organized an MC exhibition titled "Impression - Expression - Interaction/Perception in Medicine" at the international conference Medical Humanities - Interactions between Medi-

cine and the Arts in October 2019, organized by the working group *History of Medicine and Medical Humanities* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The success of the exhibition led to the development of a three-year project called "Art - Action - Attitude", which was jointly managed by the Teaching Center, the Division of Palliative Medicine, and the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at MedUni Vienna. The first exhibition of this series was supported by the Austrian Society for Comics Research and Education, and approximately 15 professionals with varying job responsibilities participated in various aspects of the project, including research, design, and web presence. Notably, both national and international artists, as well as publishers, generously donated their works to support the initiative. The project aimed to reach a broad audience, including patients, their families and friends, healthcare professionals from diverse disciplines (such as doctors, qualified nursing staff, students, trainees), and anyone interested in graphic medicine. A key focus of the project was to promote interculturality and diversity.

But what?

The Art - Action - Attitude project aimed to address daily challenges in healthcare, including stressful or complex situations that involve critical communication, using established medical comics as an accessible approach. The goal was to create public exhibitions that were accessible to all and offered free admission for visitors. The project was financed by MedUni Vienna, which covered expenses related to the design and printing costs. The exhibitions, which were held annually for three academic years (2020/21-2022/23), each focused on a specific theme relevant to the challenges faced in everyday medical practice. The themes included "Body" (2020/21), "Borders" (2021/22), and "Pain" (2022/23). The exhibition space at the Vienna General Hospital and the site of the MedUni Vienna was comprised of a corridor featuring 32 exhibition panels, with each panel showcasing a single MC artwork. For sequences of images, one theme may have spanned across two panels. Visitors could also actively participate in the exhibition through a hands-on area with various stations aimed at encouraging creativity, like

contributing words on the wall, drawing their impressions or making votings – animated by smaller panels with themes like “How do you feel after nightshift/s?”, “What makes you addicted?”.

But where?

The exhibitions were showcased in a central but peaceful corridor of the auditorium center at the Vienna General Hospital, and an area for interactive stations was provided. Despite the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, measures were taken to enable visitors from outside to access this area. The open and free access should allow a low-threshold, gradual, multiple visit. This was accompanied by the disadvantage that no valid data on visitor numbers could be generated.

But how?

The project team was organized through an online platform that utilized a tool for recording and assessing exhibition proposals. Despite the various styles, approaches, and perspectives of the submissions, the best entries were chosen. The selected creators and publishers were then contacted to obtain the necessary usage rights. In addition, text blocks were positioned around the central artwork on the panels. These blocks included information such as the title, subtitle, background

details, reflective tasks, author and/or publisher information, and artwork citation.

Art – action – attitude/ body – borders – pain

Exhibition art – action – attitude/body

The project commenced with the Body exhibition, which ran from November 2020 to June 2021. The exhibition centered around the human body, exploring its complexities such as language, sensuality, health, disease, diversity, and mortality. The exhibition featured works from 21 national and international artists, in both German and English. Additionally, a brochure in German and English was created to accompany the exhibition, and a participatory area featured a side wall titled “Art – Body – Art” with works from 11 international artists.

As a special project, a 12-page comic booklet was published in German and English in collaboration with the Austrian artist Renate Mowlam, explaining the medium of comics and its uses in a comic style (see Figure 2 for reference).

Also as free giveaways a flip book about the beginning of life (“Zellen schlagen Wellen”) and several postcards were created by Nadja Wostry, member of the comic team working at the Teaching Center.

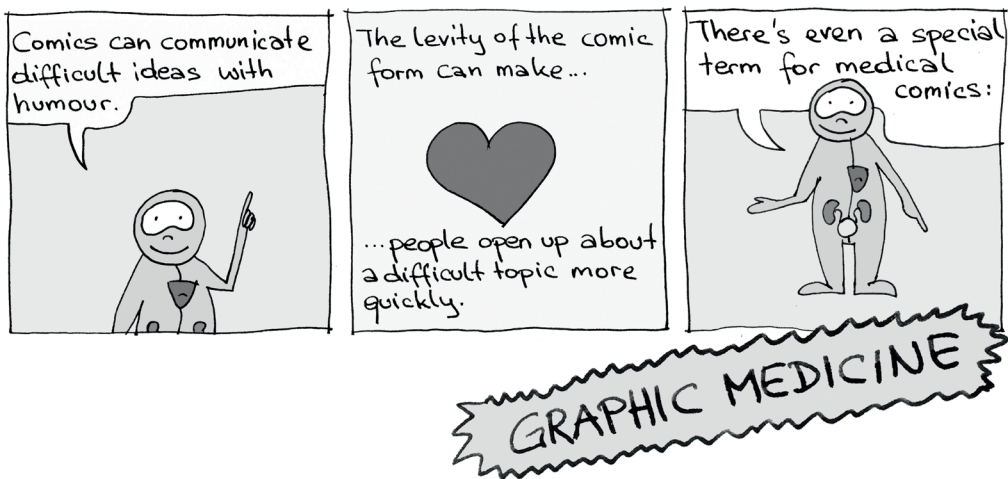


Fig. 2 Example of a medical comic; copyright of Barbara Pirker.

Exhibition art – action – attitude/borders

The second exhibition, which ran from November 2021 to June 2022, explored the concept of borders in medicine. The exhibition delved into the subjective and objective borders that individuals encounter or experience. The exhibition aimed to answer several questions, including the limits that medical staff face, the boundaries that patients and their families face, as well as therapeutic limitations. The exhibition also examined the boundaries between life and death and the spatial boundaries experienced in hospitals. Narrative Medicine was the focal point of the interactive area. The continuation of the comic booklet from the previous exhibition also addressed issues related to Global Health.

Again a brochure in German and English was published and a “Malbuch” (“drawing book for medical students and physicians”) was created by members of the Teaching Center as a special free giveaway containing creative tasks on problem areas in everyday medical life.

Exhibition art – action – attitude/pain

The *Art – Action – Attitude* project concluded with an exhibition titled “Pain” (November 2022–June 2023), which addressed the ubiquitous experience of pain in its various forms - physical, psychological, and social. The exhibition aimed to explore the factors contributing to pain and how it can be managed. Using MC to depict pain allows for a more accessible and relatable portrayal of this complex topic. The exhibition also touched on global issues such as world weariness, cultural dif-

ferences in pain management, and the impact of poor pain management on patients. Three panels were dedicated to reviewing the three exhibitions and their related initiatives, including scientific publications. Additionally, a third comic booklet on the history and management of pain, including global access to pain medication, was published (see Figure 3 for reference).

We also continued of publishing a brochure in German and English and several postcards as free giveaways.

Does it also work for teaching purposes?

The potential of MC as a teaching tool is evident, as demonstrated by their current use in two compulsory courses, each with about 650 students per year, to explore potential challenges in future medical fields. These courses incorporate MC and offer medical students the chance to contribute their own drawings. In fact, the last two exhibitions included work from medical students, and feedback indicated that this artistic approach in a medical curriculum was unexpected but widely accepted and suitable for exploring selected topics (ADAMIDIS *et al.* 2022). For teachers, MC offer a valuable teaching method, particularly in a blended learning setting, by providing a comprehensive and time-intensive analysis of students’ contributions, prompting them to visualize situations encountered in daily practice and to discuss possible solutions. In the end, a well-grounded assessment based on challenging topics may be conducted to gauge learning outcomes. MC are effective in bridging the gap between theoretical teaching and clinical practice.

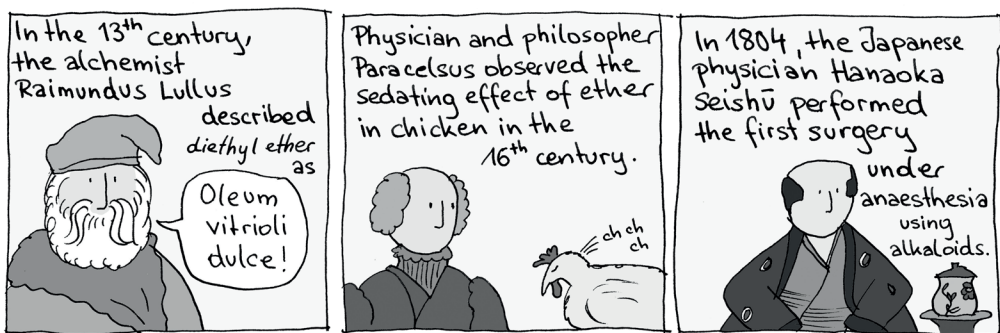


Fig. 3 Extract from the booklet *Pain*, 2022, page 7; drawings by Renate Mowlam (www.renatenwurf.at); adopted in black/white for *Curare*.

In September 2023, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research awarded the Ars Docendi Recognition Prize for Excellent Teaching at Austrian Universities 2023 in the category of Learning Outcome-Oriented Teaching and Examination Culture for the project "... When Words Are Not Enough"/ Medical Humanities: Creating Space for the Unspeakable with Images".

Did you talk and write about it?

International exchange and learning is considered as a key factor to increase one's own (also the global) knowledge and understanding. We contributed to meeting dealing with teaching, art and the cultural sector.

As far as the coronavirus pandemic allowed we participated in conferences live (e.g. KOBLIZEK *et al.* 2022a) or online (e.g. KOBLIZEK *et al.* 2022b; KOLLER *et al.* 2021) as well as in invited workshops (e.g. PRASCHINGER & MASEL 2019).

Moreover, the project was supported by scientific research, leading to the publication of several works, including contributions in journals (e.g. MASEL *et al.* 2020b; MASEL & PRASCHINGER 2020c; PRASCHINGER *et al.* 2023) and books (e.g. MASEL & PRASCHINGER 2021).

On request, guided tours have been held in the exhibition area to convey the ideas, the method and medical issues. Participants have been exposed to the aim and spirit of MC.

Celebrating the finissage

The symposium "Power of Graphic Medicine" marked the culmination of the three-year project *Art - Action - Attitude*, with over 100 attendees on June 1st 2023.

It featured nine distinguished speakers from both national and international backgrounds, who provided valuable insights into their respective work, offering new and diverse perspectives on challenging topics within the field of medicine. Medicine, despite its profound importance, is not without its own set of difficulties and complexities, affecting patients, their families, and healthcare professionals alike. By acknowledging these challenges, we can initiate conversations and address them appropriately. One effective way to approach these discussions is through visual means,

such as drawings. A drawing workshop proved, that everyone can draw, can express feelings with pictures and can tell a picture story.

The end?

After the completion of the three exhibitions and the symposium, it was determined that the aim to promote and expand the potential of graphic medicine in Austria by reaching a broad audience and advocating MC as a feasible strategy for daily medical practice had been accomplished. The exhibitions successfully engaged a large number of people, and the accompanying brochures and booklets are expected to have a lasting impact on the initiative. Presently, there is a diverse collection of MC covering a range of subjects and perspectives, encouraging discussions and inspiring new drawings. Moreover, this access to MC invites individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences on paper. The strength of this access lies in the variety of viewpoints presented to viewers, drawing attention to neglected issues and focusing on crucial details while allowing room for individual perceptions. Ultimately, this fosters a collective dialogue on difficult subjects (HOUTS *et al.* 2006).

Feedback from the symposium gave rise to the idea to subsume various initiatives across Europe, maintain the exchange and keep going. Although project *Art - Action - Attitude* concludes here, we remain open to the possibility of continuing this initiative.

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Andrea Praschinger, *1978, Mag. Dr., received a doctorate at the University of Vienna by writing about the history of hospitals in Vienna; works at the Medical University of Vienna; organizes the clinical rotations of medical students; in her academic passion she searches for ways to help students find their professional attitude and values, as well as to foster clinical reasoning; she is founding member of the graphic medicine initiative at the Medical University of Vienna and believes that creativity helps to solve everyday problems and nurses the soul.

Medical University of Vienna, Austria
e-mail: andrea.praschinger@meduniwien.ac.at

Ruth Kutalek, Mag. Dr., is a medical anthropologist, Associate Professor at the Medical University of Vienna and head of the Unit Medical Anthropology and Global Health. Her research currently focuses on anthropological perspectives of infectious diseases and citizen participation in health emergencies. She has also done work on vaccine hesitancy, migration of health workers, as well as environment, health & vulnerabilities. Ruth Kutalek is consortium lead of the KIRAS project CAVE (Community Engagement and Vulnerabilities in dealing with Epidemics <https://www.meduniwien.ac.at/web/forschung/projekte/cave/>) and was principal investigator in several EC funded projects (<https://isidore-project.eu>, <https://sonar-global.eu>, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/265727/de>).

Department of Social and Preventive Medicine
Medical University of Vienna, Austria
e-mail: ruth.kutalek@meduniwien.ac.at

Ruth Koblizek, *1973 in Vienna, MD-PhD, MSc received a doctorate of philosophy at the University of Vienna by writing about the history of the drinking water supply in Vienna; several publications about hospitals in Vienna (Rothschild-Hospital, Hartmann-Hospital), lectures at “Volkshochschule” about “women in medicine” or other medical-historical topics; works at the Medical University of Vienna, Teaching Center, department of medical didactics.

Teaching Center
Medical University of Vienna, Austria
e-mail: ruth.koblizek@meduniwien.ac.at

Eva Katharina Masel, MD-PhD, MSc is head of the Clinical Division of Palliative Medicine at the Vienna General Hospital of the Medical University of Vienna and full professor of Palliative Medicine. She is specialized in Internal Medicine and has completed a Master’s Degree in Palliative Care and PhD program in Mental Health and Behavioral Medicine. She is research group leader of the Research Group Palliative Care at the Medical University of Vienna. She has published numerous publications and is a board member of the Austrian Association of Palliative Care and a member of national and international specialist societies.

Department of Medicine I
Division of Palliative Medicine
Medical University of Vienna, Austria
e-mail: eva.masel@meduniwien.ac.at