

Making better doctors, a panel at a time

Comics are teaching tool for Penn State College of Medicine students

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One comic illustrates a medical student's losing battle with sleep while holding a surgical instrument in one position for hours in a quiet operating room, as a tiny Mr. Sandman circles her head.

Another medical student's comic strip chronicles the harvesting of a patient's organs, and how her initial excitement over a cool surgical case morphs into the realization that the patient has died in the process. "We hit the off switches," the student wrote, near her illustrations of a patient's body that had been emptied of its vital organs. "Pangs of grief hit me."

Another student chronicled her efforts to connect with a pip of a pediatric patient named Tina, "one of the meanest 8-year-olds that I had ever encountered."



Green, a professor in the Department of Humanities and Internal Medicine at the college.

Green just finished his fourth year teaching the class, likely the only one of its kind in the country. He also has helped to organize international symposiums on the topic, including one this summer in Toronto that so far has attracted 100 people.

Penn State's medical school is well-known for its long-running humanities department and its attention to teaching the human side of healing through courses incorporating jazz, meditation, poetry, film and literature.

Sara Farag, a fourth-year medical student, just finished the class, drawing a cartoon titled the "The Game of Life — Medical Student Edition," chronicling how she chose obstetrics/gynecology as her specialty.

"When you put your story into cartoons as well as writing it, it makes you realize what happened at the moment, what were people's emotions, what people around you were thinking, what you were thinking," she said.

Green got the idea for the class after he read the graphic novel "Maus," by Art Spiegelman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning comic book about Spiegelman's father's experiences in a World War II concentration camp.



Medical students at the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey are taking an unusual course titled "Graphic Storytelling and Medical Narratives," where they read graphic novels and comics written about medical experiences and then create their own comics for the class.

"It provides an outlet for students to reflect on their experiences, to write about it, to think about it and to share it with others," said Dr. Michael

"It was the first time I realized that comics, as a medium, could be used to address serious issues," said Green, who read Superman, Batman and other superhero comic books as a kid. "I was really blown away."

Comics or graphic novels are powerful because they allow writers to communicate through images and words, said Green, who discovered there is a whole genre of medically themed graphic novels, including "Cancer Vixen" and "Stitches."

"I thought, 'This is really interesting, I love reading these,'" he said. "They are engaging and they are beautiful to look at, and they explore themes and issues that are important for doctors and medical students to understand."

Green decided to teach a course on the topic but could find no one else who had done so. So he created his own class, choosing graphic novels for the students to read before directing them to create their own comics.

Sara Marian Seibert, a fourth-year medical student, created a comic she titled "How a GREEN CHILE CHEESBURGER almost killed Aunt Cindy," detailing her aunt's experience with gallstones and gallbladder surgery.

In the comic, Seibert draws herself as a knight in medical armor walking into her aunt's room. It shows her efforts to provide her aunt with insider medical student information.

At the end, she drew a picture of herself, holding her aunt's hand, and wrote, "Sometimes, the best medical advice I can give my family is to be there to support, not judge, their medical decisions, hold their hand, and bring the occasional apple juice."

She picked the experience, she said, because it deeply personalized what it's like to have a harrowing medical problem hit a family member, and how important empathy is at that time.

"It's someone's aunt, or someone's daughter or sister, and you need to treat them as a person and not just a disease process that you're learning about," she said.

The need for empathy also was at the heart of Jeff Monk's "Christmas Carol"-inspired cartoon about a dismissive Scrooge-like doctor who callously sends away a patient who is having chest pains and hurting in other ways.



A longtime fan of comics such as Superman, Monk plans to go into pediatrics and would love to create a cartoon for his future small patients, saying that would be an ideal way to explain a problem such as asthma to a child.

That's just the kind of lesson Green hopes his students will take from the class into the world.

"I think comics can help them with their communication skills, their diagnostic skills, their empathy skills," he said. "Students have said, 'This is going to make me a better doctor.'"

