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To help address the well-being of the campus and contribute to empathy building amongst students pursuing careers as healthcare providers, an academic health sciences library built a graphic novel collection focused on comics that discuss medical conditions and health-related topics. The collection contains the experiences of patients, providers, and caregivers. The reader-friendly format of graphic novels provides an easy entry point for discussing empathy with health professions faculty and students. The collection has been used in the classroom during library instruction sessions, with the idea of integrating it within the curriculum.

Keywords: graphic medicine; graphic novels; comics; wellness; empathy

Introduction

The University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) is an academic health sciences center that provides health professions education to more than 4,500 students. UNMC is one of four campuses in the University of Nebraska System. Since 2016, UNMC has increased its focus on wellness and burnout in the campus community. These efforts have been reflected in the university's strategic plan. One of the overarching university-wide strategic goals centers on organizational culture and states that the university seeks to “strengthen faculty, student and employee loyalty, satisfaction and wellness by enhancing organizational programs and culture”.¹ The university chancellor expects every entity on campus to address wellness in their unit's strategic initiatives.

The McGoogan Health Sciences Library serves all students, faculty, and staff at UNMC, along with health professionals from the university's clinical partners. Because the library ties its work to the larger university strategic plan, it has included several

initiatives focusing on wellness for the past several years. One initiative that the library pursued was to build a collection of graphic novels/comics that can assist with building empathy for healthcare students and be a tool for promoting the wellness of our faculty, students, and staff. In 2019, UNMC's Interprofessional Academy of Educators, a community that brings educators from across disciplines to collaborate and improve the learning experience, created a Health Humanities interest group to address the campus's growing interest in this area. This graphic medicine collection is one way the library supports this subject area.

While there is little existing literature about the use of graphic novels specifically in health sciences libraries, there is evidence in the literature supporting the use of graphic novels to promote empathy and educational purposes.

Literature Review

Public and school libraries have included graphic novels in their collections for many years.^{2,3} Academic libraries have offered graphic novels as a non-academic resource for students' leisure time.^{4,5} Some academic libraries have also added graphic novels to their collection as resources for students studying teaching and curriculum.^{4,6}

With graphic novels and comics becoming more common, they have also been used for patient education in hospitals and health clinics. Ian Williams coined the phrase 'graphic medicine' and defined it as "the intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare".⁷ Comics may be seen as a pleasant, non-threatening way to learn about a medical condition or disease and have been shown to increase knowledge on targeted health topics.⁸⁻¹⁰ Graphic novels have also been used when addressing unpleasant medical tests or uncomfortable issues such as abuse, addiction, and abortion.¹¹

Health sciences education and training programs have employed graphic novels to bolster traditional textbook learning. Students new to anatomy may feel overwhelmed by the way and amount of information presented in conventional textbooks, but using graphic novels may enhance learning by presenting information clearly and focusing on the number of details given.¹² The engaging format of graphic novels can also aid in getting medical students to complete necessary assigned pre-readings for their clinical rotations and reinforce required education content in residency programs.^{13, 14}

In addition to teaching medical topics and healthcare concepts, graphic novels can promote empathy by portraying patient and caregiver experiences. Lo-Fo-Wong described how the graphic novel *Cancer Vixen* depicted five of the frequent topics in graphic medicine novels: fear, pain, insurance problems, depression, and fatigue.^{15, 16} Because of the range of topics addressed in the book, it, or other similar graphic novels, may be helpful in educational settings around discussions about physician-patient interactions and the broader life implications of patients receiving a diagnosis.¹⁷ Graphic novels can address the wellness needs of healthcare workers and provide a vehicle to discuss burnout.¹⁸

Background

One of the authors (King) is interested in graphic novels, comics, manga, anime, and video games and owns an extensive collection of this type of literature. Her graduate school's library had a collection of over 600 graphic novels, graphic narratives, comics, and scholarly criticism on the field, including fiction and non-fiction. During an internship in the library, King met an English faculty member utilizing graphic novels and their depictions of war and trauma in the classroom. This experience sparked an interest in graphic novels beyond fiction and how visual

narratives of illness were used to illustrate a person's real-life traumatic experiences. When King was hired at the McGoogan Health Sciences Library, she began seeking graphic novels like those she had seen and learned more about the field of graphic medicine. With UNMC's focus on wellness, it became clear that the library could help address these issues by building a graphic medicine collection.

Building the Collection

In the spring of 2021, the library submitted a proposal for the Eisner Graphic Novel Grant for Libraries administered by the Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table of the American Library Association.¹⁹ This grant proposal aimed to build a graphic medicine collection and pilot a quarterly year-long series of graphic medicine book clubs that focused on themes of empathy and health disparities by examining the patient experience. The circulating library collection did not include graphic novels at the time of the submission. Although the grant submission was unsuccessful, the library Dean recognized the value this collection would bring to the UNMC community and allocated \$1,500 to build a small collection.

Although there are articles on general academic libraries and graphic novel collections, there was no information readily available about how or whether academic health sciences libraries have built graphic medicine collections and utilized them with their student and faculty populations.^{4, 5, 20} However, three resources were valuable in identifying relevant titles for the collection. One was the *Essential Graphic Medicine: An Annotated Bibliography*, which contains a list of essential titles that should be considered for inclusion in graphic medicine collections. This project was created in response to numerous requests to the authors for guidance on how to begin a graphic medicine collection and includes 30 titles for consideration.²¹ The Network of the

National Library of Medicine (NNLM) also offers a graphic medicine book club kit that lists titles and descriptions of various graphic medicine options. The last resource useful in identifying potential titles for purchase was the Graphic Medicine Book Title List compiled by Matthew N. Noe and updated by Sarah Levin-Lederer.²² As graphic novels are not part of the library's approval plan and appropriate titles are not readily available from the library's primary book vendor, one of the authors reached out to a local comic bookstore and met with the store's owner, who offered a list of recommendations after hearing about the type of collection the library was hoping to build.

A list of 79 titles were identified for purchase. This list included a wide range of topics, such as experiences of childhood sexual abuse, cancer, epilepsy, autism, gender dysphoria, suicide, eating disorders, addiction, rape, and many more. In the end, 64 titles were purchased either through GOBI Library Solutions or Amazon. Several were out-of-print or not available through these two vendors. About \$1,200 of the allocated budget was used. The books were ready for checkout in Fall 2021.

The McGoogan Health Sciences Library uses both Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). Because the subject heading 'graphic novel' is the authorized term for both thesauri, a local subject heading "graphic medicine" was added to the records since this collection was going to be promoted and marketed using that phrase. While general academic libraries may struggle with how to classify graphic novels using Library of Congress (LC) classification, these graphic medicine titles were classed using the National Library of Medicine (NLM) classification in accordance with local cataloging practices.^{4, 20} Additionally, none of the titles in this collection were part of a series, so the challenges libraries face with cataloging graphic novel series were not an issue.

Promoting the Collection

Some faculty members may resist the use of graphic medicine in the classroom as they may view graphic novels and comics as not scholarly enough and believe that these types of works are meant to be read for enjoyment. However, the library has promoted the collection by using it in conjunction with existing course materials.

Although circulation of these titles has been low so far, the library has heavily marketed the collection. A library research guide was created that focuses on what graphic medicine is, which graphic pathographies are represented within the collection, how to use graphic medicine in the classroom, webcomics, and an explanation of what the components of a comic are and how to read them.²³ The library also promotes graphic medicine with a monthly staff pick where a library staff member reads one of the books in the collection and writes a short review posted on the graphic medicine research guide and links to the catalog record.

After renovations to the library space, the circulating book collection was reduced and moved to a less prominent location. One of the new features of the renovated space is a small, windowed room on the library's main level that displays the collection of anatomical models that students can borrow. Because of the visual nature of graphic novels, putting these books in the general circulating collection was not ideal, so space was made in the model room to display the graphic medicine collection. The display is changed monthly to reflect the current month's staff pick and contains a QR code next to the window that links to the library's research guide for further information.

When the library participates in student wellness events and student orientation fairs, several books from the collection are displayed to create additional awareness of the collection. The library has used social media posts, notes in liaison newsletters,

physical and virtual flyers, blog posts, and an article in the university-wide publication to spread the word about the collection.

A presentation was given to faculty in the Interprofessional Academy of Educators' Health Humanities group. The presentation covered the definition of graphic medicine and the different experiences reflected in this format. The group was very excited about what could be possible with graphic medicine and discussed attempting to include it in future student Interprofessional Event (IPE) Days. During IPE days, students work together to complete exercises highlighting the importance of teamwork and communication within today's multidisciplinary healthcare settings.

How the collection is being used

Although circulation of the collection has been low, there has been an uptick in activity corresponding to outreach and instruction efforts (see Figure 1). The modest use is not surprising as this is a relatively new collection and unlike any other collection the library has offered. The most frequently borrowed titles have been *COVID chronicles: a comics anthology*, *The best we could do: an illustrated memoir*, and *Graphic medicine manifesto*.^{7, 24, 25}

Figure 1. Monthly circulation statistics for graphic medicine titles

Early experiences with graphic medicine and our students, faculty, and staff have been positive. One student mentioned they had a family member recently diagnosed with an eating disorder and were looking for something to help them understand their family member's experience. The student was excited that this collection was available to them and, in addition to reading the book *Lighter Than My Shadow* for themselves, also indicated they wanted to pass the book along to the family member so that they could see that they were not alone, and that other people struggle

with eating disorders as well.²⁶

A single-session library class, “Graphic Medicine: The Healthcare Experience and Empathy Learning,” has been taught to students in two of UNMC’s pipeline programs. This session is an introductory class that explores graphic medicine, what it is, provides examples and its value to the healthcare field, and examines the perspectives of healthcare providers, patients, and caregivers. One example of a patient perspective that students review is Matthew Paul Mewhorter’s online comic *Cancer Owl*.²⁷ *Cancer Owl* is included to illustrate that graphic medicine can also live online, and they may come across examples of it that are outside the physical UNMC collection. During this portion of the class the discussion focuses on the shock of receiving a diagnosis and how they, as future healthcare providers, would consider how to respond to a newly diagnosed patient with empathy. The first group who receives this instruction are students who are part of the High School Alliance. In this academic program, local junior and senior high school students attend UNMC to take classes and shadow healthcare professionals and researchers. The graphic medicine class is a guest lecture built into their semester-long course, “The Art and Science of Decision Making.”

Figure 2. Cancer Owl panels utilized during class (reprinted with permission)

The second pipeline program that receives this class is the Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP). The SURP program provides undergraduate students the opportunity to gain first-hand research experience. During this class, the SURP students participate in two exercises: a case study exercise and a collaborative drawing exercise. During the case study exercise, the students are divided into two groups. Each group reads a handout without knowing what the other group is reading. They then discuss four questions with their group and provide their answers to the

larger class. All students answer the same questions, but the two groups review different handouts. The first group reads a text-based portion of a case study on a diagnosis, and the second reads a graphic medicine representation of that same diagnosis. During the larger class discussion, the answers of the first group tend to be more clinical, while the second group gives more empathetic responses and is focused on emotions. This leads to a discussion of the value of graphic representations of diagnoses and surprise when they discover they were viewing the same diagnosis. The second activity is the collaborative graphic medicine drawing exercise. This exercise is completed at the end of class to check their understanding of graphic medicine. The students are divided into groups of 5 or 6, and each group is given a page containing six blank comic panels. They work together to complete a timed graphic medicine comic; each student gets one minute to draw a panel before they are required to pass it to the next person to continue the story until all six panels are completed. The fast-paced nature of this timed exercise helps students focus on the concept of the comic they are creating versus worrying about their drawing skills. Upon completing the activity, each group explains what is happening in their comic and why it would be considered graphic medicine.

Future Directions

The plan is to continue to grow the use of the collection and further integrate it within the classroom environment beyond the pipeline programs. One potential route to expand the use of the collection is working towards integrating graphic medicine into UNMC's Interprofessional Education days that first-year students participate in. Faculty may not have time for a graphic medicine-focused session in their curriculum, but incorporating some aspects of graphic medicine in courses with a library instruction component is viable. As the library increases the use of the collection in the classroom, more

formalized assessment methods will be developed to gather feedback from students and faculty.

Another option for expanding the use of the collection may be to incorporate graphic medicine in micro-credentialing courses. A new initiative from the UNMC Office of Noncredit Learning offers grant funds for creating micro-credential courses that anyone in the world can take. These short courses are meant to allow participants to learn new skills that can immediately be put into practice. The library could pursue these grant funds to create a noncredit course on visual literacy incorporating the graphic medicine collection.

Considerations when building a collection

For libraries looking to build a graphic medicine collection to be used for more than leisure reading, it would be helpful to gauge the interest of faculty and get an idea of the health topics included in the curriculum before building a potential title list. When building the collection at UNMC, the authors purchased books on a wide range of topics without consulting faculty members from the different colleges. With faculty input, the collection could have been more focused on topics of interest, such as public health, and then slowly expanded.

Identifying potential advocates for a graphic medicine collection can help provide ideas for where the collection could possibly be utilized. They can also offer further recommendations on additional titles to consider for the collection. The authors identified some key advocates through the university's Health Humanities interest group.

The location of the collection can help promote it. The McGoogan Library operates using a closed stacks model, so if the graphic medicine collection was shelved with the rest of the library's monograph collection it would have been hidden away and only visible via the library's catalog. The decision to create a permanent display window has led to numerous casual conversations about the collection with individuals who saw a specific book on display and indicated that they had an interest in the topic.

Lastly, consider how to best publicize the collection. This includes both the initial publicity push for when the collection is newly available and how to maintain ongoing interest in the collection. At UNMC, many faculty members read the university-wide publication and the library's liaison newsletters, while students are more likely to engage with physical fliers and social media posts. Those methods of communication were useful for the initial publicity, and the authors found that the monthly staff pick, and displaying the books at various orientation and wellness fairs on campus has helped with creating further interest in the collection and maintaining relevancy.

Conclusion

Creating a graphic medicine collection aims to promote empathy for patients among UNMC students who represent the future healthcare workforce. Evidence indicates that the empathy of resident physicians declines the further they progress during their residency and medical school education.²⁸ By introducing graphic novels that center around patient experiences, students can be reminded that, as they become more immersed in their studies, it is easy to focus on diagnosis and treatment while forgetting that they are, in fact, treating a person who may be facing many complicated experiences and emotions. Other books that can help promote this type of empathetic

understanding for patients include monographs focused on the experience of an important historical figure of medicine or reading the autobiographies/memoirs of people who have struggled to navigate different diagnoses they have received. However, regular reading of these longer works is likely too time-consuming for our students, faculty, and staff. Graphic novels can be consumed much faster thanks to their visual and more text-light format.

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