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# **Graphic in Health Care: Understanding Graphic Narrative Approach to Represent and Communicate Health**

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**Abstract.** Communication between doctors and patients is many a time not effective. Problems such as technical terms, complex messages, amount of information, etc., come into the picture. Given these problems, healthcare providers and practitioners are now using graphic medicine and graphic narratives as a source of health communication. The term 'Graphic medicine' is coined by an allied group of artists, researchers, and health practitioners. Graphic medicine refers to graphics and visual narratives representing health information specific to a health topic. Graphics/illustrations and text to compliment the illustrations are used to represent health messages. This visual medium can be used to educate, inform, entertain, and re-frame an individual experience about health care and medicine. Health practitioners have used graphics and visual narratives (comics) to communicate health information to people for over decades; this health information ranges from cancer, AIDS/HIV, smoking, mental health, and other health-related information for the public good. Overall, medical research and relevant public health focus on this medium's utility to communicate (a) health information specific to certain content (b) the health experience of an

individual. Narrative is one of the basic modes of acquiring information. In the field of health communication, narrative as a health communication approaches is emerging to bring health- behavior changes. This paper aims to (a) describe graphic medicine and graphic narrative, (b) the effect of graphic narrative/narrative in health communication, (c) recommend for potential application of graphic narrative as a health communication approach.

**Keywords:** *Graphic medicine; Graphic narratives; Health communication; Health behavior*

## **1 Introduction**

Graphic medicine and graphic narratives are the forms of health communication medium and have emerged over the past few decades. With more work on graphic health information coming every year, this field is expanding its health contents. Many of these visual health contents were illustrated and framed in narration by skilled and unskilled artists. These artists illustrate and narrate their personal experiences with specific health conditions or caring for loved ones with specific health conditions. These authors are quite successful in expressing their health experiences to their audiences in a narrative way that is more engaging. The narrative is one of the basic modes of acquiring information. In the field of health communication, narrative as health communication approaches is emerging to bring health-behavior changes.

## **2 Defining the term Graphic medicine and Graphic narrative**

**The term Graphic medicine, as Czerwicc defines, an intersecting space between comic medium and health information, used along with the principle of narrative and comic elements to represent an emotional/physical condition [1]. Graphic medicine requires a skillful representation of picture and text, arranged sequentially to describe a particular health information/experience [2].**

**Different researchers define the graphic narrative in many ways and has no universally accepted definition. This is evident from the studies which includes 'narrative' as a subject. Lack of understanding of the term 'graphic narrative/narrative' can create difficulties in further research in the context of graphic narrative as an approach for persuasive health communication. Taking references from studies describing similar themes and concepts on narratives [3,4,5,6], we attempt to define Graphic narrative as "A Graphic narrative is a plot of the coherent story represented through series of illustration-text combination incorporating characters and events to create a beginning, middle and end of a story to provide information about events, characters, unresolved conflicts, resolution and raises unanswered questions".**

**Use and application of graphic narrative to create health awareness and bring health-behaviour change can be viewed in many forms. Schank (2002), in his study, mention five different story/narrative types, each used under different context and purpose, first-hand stories- telling experience of an individual, secondhand stories- retelling someone else story, invented stories- stories with fictional characters and events, cultural stories- stories of cultural events handed down generation to generation, official stories- also fictional and created to communicate the specific event to an individual or a group. A**

**graphic narrative/narrative could belong to any of these categories while using it as a communication medium [7].**

### **3 Why use Graphic narrative/narrative approaches in health awareness and health-behaviour change.**

**We often communicate and share our experiences with others in our everyday lives with narratives and stories. The use of narrative for communicating health awareness and health-behavior change seems promising because of its fundamental nature of human interaction. The use of narrative is quite common among social and political events for sharing information with the targeted population. Its use can be seen in journalism and news reporting and this is how we learn about our surroundings [8]. Product advertisements, services, and T.V programs are shown and introduced every day using different narratives [9]. Also, it is a common and familiar way of sharing information.**

**Another important viewpoint to consider graphic narrative/narrative approach for health awareness and health behavior change can be understood by Bruner's study. Bruner mentioned two different ways of understanding and knowing about new things: first- the pragmatic way, second- the narrative way [10]. The pragmatic way is more toward a scientific way, including experiments, methods, data, facts, tests, and validations, etc., about the concerned topic. [11]. In contrast to this, the narrative way is more toward a storytelling way, including gripping drama, characters, events, historical accounts, personal or someone's else experience, etc. In his study, Schank [7] mentioned that understanding a particular event or situation requires storing information in our memory and retrieving the story associated with it. This narrative communication mode may**

be effective while addressing themes like health experience, personal values, social relationships, morality, and other themes that have less support of reason and logic [11].

The scientific (pragmatic way) and the storytelling (narrative way) are necessary to understand new things around us. Both are effective in their specific circumstances.

#### **4 Narrative approach in transmitting meaning.**

While considering graphics/comics and health communication, few questions seem to be addressed first. What is the process by which particular information is transmitted to an individual/viewer? What kind of images (picture, graphics) and stories are more effective for creating meaning and communication? How narrative plays a role in health communication and how it can be used effectively for graphic health representation.

Studies on Psychological research mention how a narrative affects an individual (listener/viewer/reader). Green and Brock coined the term 'transportation imagery model' (TIM) [12,13]. TIM describes how an individual is transported to an imaginary space when going through a narrative story. This transportation results from 'an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events' [14]. Narrative both in the form of visuals(graphics) and the text probably act and affect an individual in the same way.

Comic theorist, Martin Baker, describes the work of Maccoby and Wilson (both psychologists), who studied observational learning in the context of films [15]. Maccoby and Wilson described the learning process as 'identification.' They described 'identification' as a process through which individuals momentarily place themselves in the scene and role of character and feel the same as

character. In his study, Baker suggests this learning process of 'identification' is related to problematic assumptions. However, understanding through narration (as described in TIM) is different from the 'identification' process. TIM requires the active participation of an individual. The individual's transportation or 'mental product' while going through a narration/story is attributed to the reader's response to the story, character, and events. In this way, imagery transportation is based on the strength (quality) of the narrative and reader's active participation. Once the reader engages actively, the reader experiences the events, emotions, and feelings of the character and gains additional information. With this imagery transportation, graphic narrative/ narrative can change and influence old beliefs, attitudes, and practices in the viewers/readers [12,13].

## **5 Recommendation**

### **5.1 Narrative as a tool to enact real-life situations.**

Using narratives to teach real-life situations, Cole used this narrative approach for decision-making exercises under emergencies. Cole developed a narrative of an emergency scenario for coal mine workers [23]. The narrative scenario consisted of many decision-making points. The worker can read the narrative of this emergency situation. Throughout the narrative, they are forced to decide (how one should act under an emergency). With every correct decision taken, they proceed through the narrative, and with every incorrect decision, they proceed to choices where again they have to rethink and make choices. This narrative application to teach real-life scenarios suggests that narratives can create scenarios where individuals or

groups can be trained to make proper decisions under certain circumstances. Moreover, many narrative communication approaches are engaging, thus making health information more contextual and acceptable to the intended audiences.

## **5.2 Narrative as a tool for Model health behavior**

As mentioned above, the witness project is one such example of narrative as a tool for health behavior change. The project shows how cancer survivors (acting as a model) sharing their stories/experiences to the community results in increased responses on self-breast cancer screening [24,25,26]. Another such example is the CDC AIDS project- a community-based demonstration project to prevent HIV/AIDS [27]. Personal stories were collected from the audience and shared among their peers. The project also included other supports such as distributing AIDS prevention information and condoms. So, the entire credit could not be attributed to the project intervention's narrative aspect (collection and sharing of stories). However, these projects show how narrative can be used as an intervention tool to bring specific behavior and how it can be used in health awareness intervention for the broader community.

## **5.3 Narrative as a tool to reach a population with oral tradition.**

Use of narrative as a communication tool to reach population having oral tradition. For example- many Indian states (West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, etc.) still have a tradition of folk paintings where chitrakar (painters) shows the painting and narrates it orally to the audience in the form of songs. Paintings

**themes were usually from mythology and community stories, but over the past few years, new themes were incorporated with the help of NGOs working in child marriage and AIDS awareness programs. Hence, such initiatives can be made using narrative to reach a population group with oral traditions.**

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