

Comics aren't just for kids:

Using cartoons in medical communications

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Abstract

Comics aren't just for kids. They're a provocative, entertaining, and storytelling medium powerful enough to captivate people of all ages, all languages, and all cultures – no small feat in today's era of instant gratification. To engage our audience, medical writers and journalists can use *graphic medicine* – the intersection of comics and healthcare discourse. I produced a graphic medicine comic about a cosmetic procedure, the Vampire Facial, and applied five authentication strategies to gain my audience's trust in this promising communication medium.

I still remember the day that I got my first comic book. It was an *Archie and the Gang* double edition from my older, cooler cousin. When he handed it to me, I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from curling up to my ears in a goofy, toothy grin. I cradled my new comic book and closed my eyes to imagine all the time that we'd be spending together. ("So this is what it feels like to be in love," I thought.) But as my joy soared, my father's displeasure grew. Comic books, he admonished, are junk that belonged in the junk pile. But to my surprise, he didn't toss it in the trash with the apple cores and crumpled juice boxes. Instead, he hid it. With the unbridled boldness that comes with an 11-year-old youth, I rolled up my pink jumper sleeves and started sleuthing. I scoured drawers, ransacked cupboards, and turned over beds. At last, I found it – up high on a shelf in my parent's tiny walk-in closet, under my dad's sweaters. I grabbed my beloved comic book and slinked

Visual literacy is now a required skill for communication.

away to a corner in my bedroom and devoured every word and every drawing in every panel from bright-coloured cover to bright-coloured cover. Until recently, I have left my love of comics with my youth. But now, when I muse about how best to capture my audience's attention about health and medical topics, I'm taken back to comics – my fondest memories of reading. I wonder, can medical writers (and journalists) use comics to captivate their audience the way that Archie and his gang of far-out friends captivated me?

Information in our back pocket 24 hours a day

We are forming expanding seas of information, propelling us into once unthinkable frontiers like the recent CRISPR gene modification technology. And we are enthralled with our seas of information. Our culture of immediacy and our iPhone mini-computers entice us to jump into the info waters, prepared or not, in search of answers to each one of our burning questions. Waiting a week for our dermatologist to tell us what this new rash is, is a week too late.

Like our audiences, medical writers and medical journalists (herein referred to as medical writers) are fixated with information. Our fixation, however, lies in how we construct knowledge to convey information in plain language and visuals.¹ Comics – a hybrid of text and image, presented as two narrative tracks in sequential order² – supports our aim to engage the public. In some contexts, particularly in the US, comics are perceived as juvenile and simplistic;^{3,4} literature relegated to children. And yet, our (everyone, including medical writers) frenzied obsession with comics (think of the X-Men franchise) demonstrates how magnetic they really are. Comics

have the power to convey complex information using text and visuals through narrative and storytelling. It's the combination of text and narratives presented in panels and purposeful

spacing that allows comics to transcend language and socioeconomic barriers,⁵ inviting a broad audience.³ They increase attention to, and recall of, information – and provide enjoyment to the viewer^{6,7} (I use the descriptor, *viewer*, instead of *reader* to take into account that some may not understand the text but can understand the pictures). It is also important for medical writers to be aware that literacy is changing.⁸ Unlike previous years, visual literacy is now a required skill for communication and "comics are at the centre of this phenomenon."⁸

Comics are known by different names: *graphic novel*, *sequential art*, *graphic literature*, *comics journalism*, and *graphic narrative*. On the

health and medical frontier, comics are often referred to as *graphic medicine* – the "intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare."⁹

Graphic medicine has emerged in three categories: instructional, personal stories, and therapeutics.¹⁰ Graphic medicine is an ideal instructional medium as the hybrid of text and visuals aptly explain complex

concepts and may encourage behavioural change.⁵ For example, comics can transport a reader to invisible places like depicting how coughs spread clouds of infectious material^{4,5} (for example, *Be aware of droplets and bubbles!!*¹¹). By using graphic medicine to tell personal stories, the writer or illustrator documents their personal health experiences which can be a space to voice anxiety and fears (for example, *Inequity in the time of pandemic*)¹²; sometimes with an interjection of humour (see, *Creativity in captivity*).¹³ Comics have expanded from a solitary viewing experience to a collaborative, therapeutic production.¹⁰ The Graphic Medicine International Collective, for example, has been hosting "Drawing Together" sessions where comic artists assemble virtually and draw together.¹⁴

Can graphic medicine be authentic?

Authenticity and reliability are integral to medical writers' work. But if comics are a hybrid of text and visuals, fact and fiction, *can graphic*



medicine be authentic? The answer is a resounding yes. The journalistic standards of reliability and authenticity are central to the comic output that fuses “aspects of hard news and entertainment, factual reporting and fictional storytelling, accuracy and exaggeration, and credibility and creativity”.¹⁵ Authenticity in media, however, is a paradox. The information that the writer or illustrator presents to the world is mediated. Reality is represented thus constructed, manipulated, or even faked.¹⁶ It’s important to remember that writers, journalists, and/or photographers take creative liberties, from minor to major, with photographs and text also.¹⁶ For instance, with text, an article that a journalist wrote based on an interview is a true story, but only part of the true story. Certain details were the focus while others were not. With photographs, choosing one photo over another or editing by cropping is a representation of reality. However, in the case of drawn visuals as opposed to photographs (which we assume are authentic), the viewer accepts that the visuals are subjective and may therefore be misleading because, by their nature, they are artifacts of the writer or illustrator. It’s this unknown degree of the writer or illustrator’s interpretation that may chase away a prospective viewer. Therefore information in comic form may prevent the public from trusting health information.

Medical writers can create comics that their audience can trust

Medical writers can help their viewers distinguish fact from fiction and assess the level of subjectivity by being transparent about how the comic was created. Transparency builds authenticity. Journalistic transparency, according to Weber and Rall,¹⁶ involves being transparent about research strategies, methods, and sources. It’s about showing the viewer where the information comes from and how the comic was created.

Applying authentication strategies to a comic about vampire facials

In 2013, Kim Kardashian introduced the world to the Vampire Facial with a photo of herself sitting regally as if she were waiting for a cup of matcha green tea – her face covered in what appeared to be blood.¹⁷ Only the rich – we thought – do such kooky treatments in their privileged quest for youth. But as I get older and have somehow found my feet on the same path to reclaimed youth, I consulted with aesthetic nurse Jessica Varga, to learn if a fountain-of-youth procedure exists. It apparently does. Jessica is a gracious nurse with a velvety voice that matches her velvety skin, who loves her job so much that she works at three different medical spas, including her own, which she recently opened in London, Ontario, Canada. The infamous Vampire Facial, or PRP (platelet-rich plasma) treatment, she told me, is a popular, non-invasive,

and relatively affordable treatment (compared to a surgical face-lift for example). PRP involves two main steps. The first step is microneedling – pricking the skin with sterilised needles using the SkinPen[®] to make hundreds of microscopic wounds (i.e. tiny holes). This controlled wound-making procedure triggers the body’s natural healing process in which collagen is generated, rejuvenating the skin. The second step is applying the client’s own PRP onto their face which, courtesy of the tiny holes, drinks it in. PRP, one type of blood cells, contains growth factors that can speed up healing and stimulate tissue regeneration.¹⁸ I interviewed Jessica because her passion filled the treatment room and her expertise converted me into a PRP believer. I turned the interview into an 8-panel comic (Figure 1, panels 1–3).

In their article about comics journalism, Weber and Rall¹⁶ outline five authentication strategies which medical writers can use in graphic medicine.

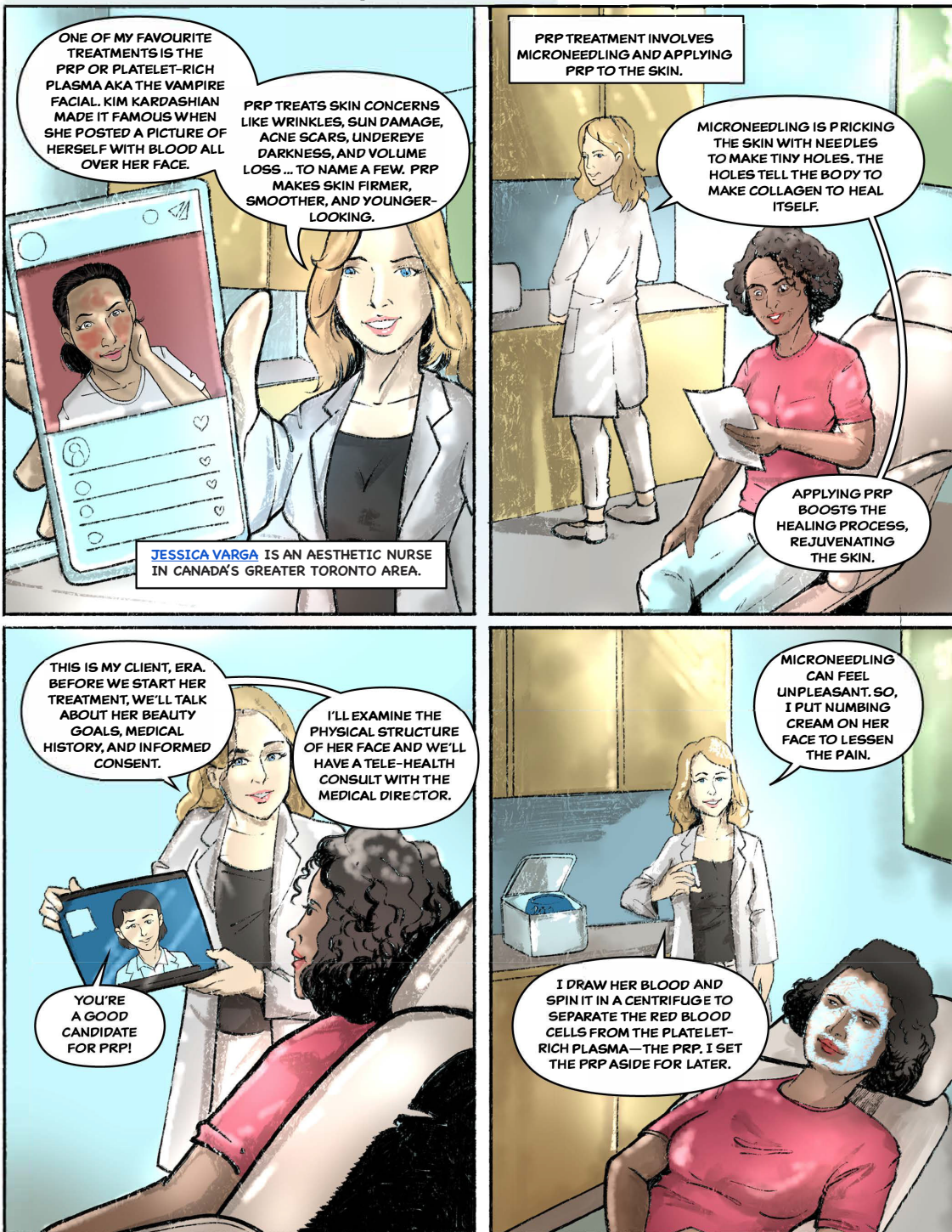
Strategy 1: The writer’s presence

In the comic, I’m the client. In reality, I didn’t have the PRP treatment done; however, I had a similar facial treatment. I decided to take this creative liberty because I was able to draw from my experience with Jessica in the medical spa. This fictional element of the comic doesn’t change the truth of how Jessica conducts the PRP treatment.

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PRP aka The Vampire Facial

Interviewed July 11, 2021



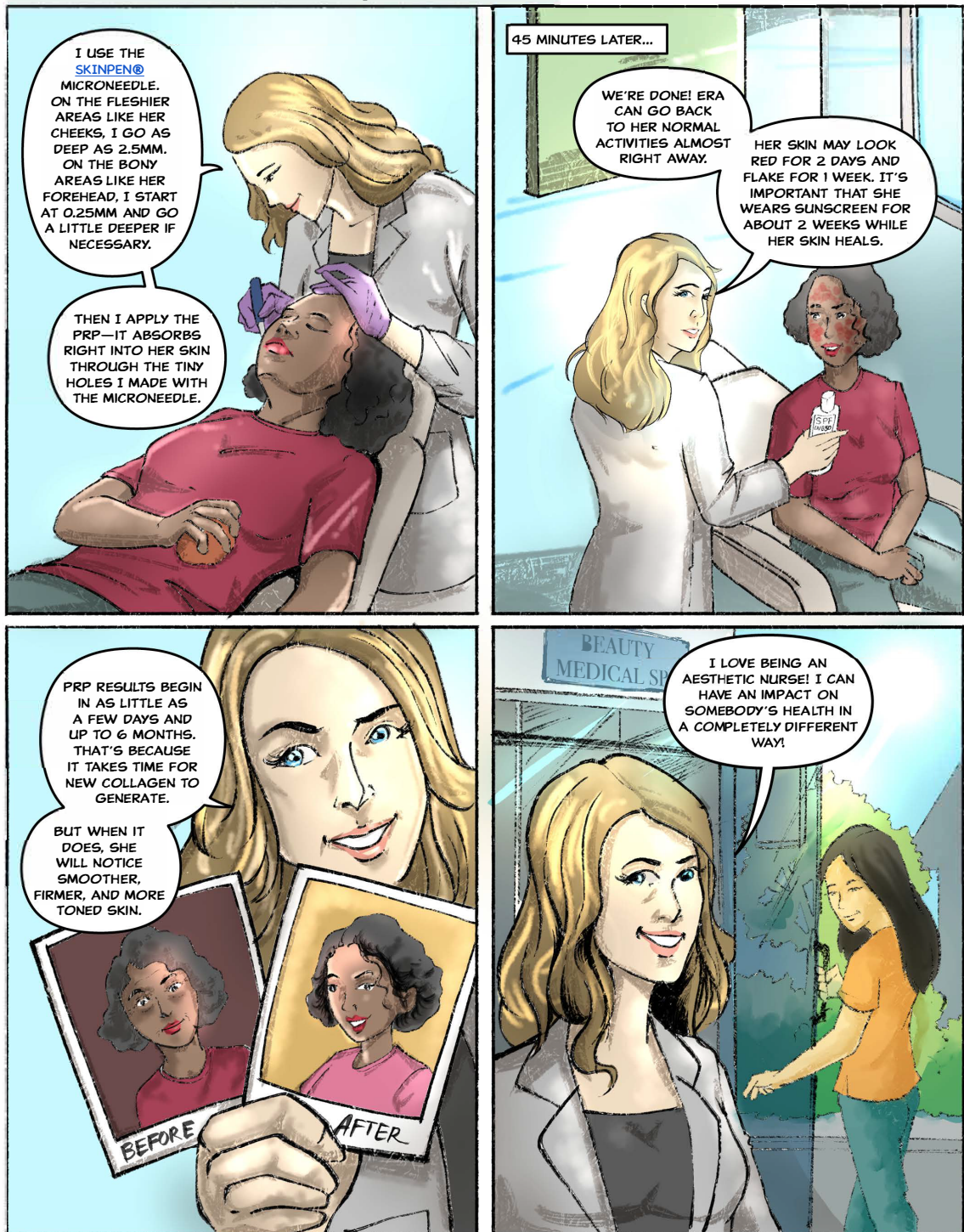
1

Figure 1, panel 1. Graphic medicine comic about the PRP (platelet-rich plasma) treatment aka the Vampire Facial.

Pictures and short bio data of comic characters show authenticity of information.

PRP aka The Vampire Facial

Interviewed July 11, 2021



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Figure 1, panel 2

About the collaborators



(Above): Aesthetic Nurse and Interviewee Jessica Varga.

Jessica Varga started her career as a registered nurse in Alberta, Canada. She was a charge nurse and labour and delivery nurse in a rural hospital serving many surrounding reservations. Since relocating back to Ontario, Canada, she has trained extensively in aesthetic nursing. Jessica currently works in three medical spas, including her own. Jessica has a passion for women's health, skin health, and functional medicine.



(Above): Illustrator Rizqi R. Mosmarth.

Rizqi Mosmarth is an artist from Jakarta, Indonesia. He creates illustrations, comics, and simple animation. Mosmarth is an editor at BumiLangit and co-creator/founder and editor at FIGHT comic magazine.



(Above): Author Era Mae Ferron.

Era Mae Ferron is a PhD-prepared registered nurse based out of Toronto, Canada. For over 10 years, Era has been writing for academic, healthcare provider, and public audiences in nursing and occupational health and safety. Because of her love of writing and plain language communication, Era founded the health and medical communications company, The Writing Era Inc.

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Figure 1, panel 3

Strategy 2: Physical resemblance

In the bio section at the end of the comic (Figure 1), I include headshots of the interviewee (Jessica), the illustrator (Mosmarth), and the writer (myself) so that viewers can see that we are real people.

Strategy 3: Style

In comics journalism, cartooning techniques such as motion lines, sound words (ouch! bam!), or thought bubbles are limited. Instead, the medical spa in the comic was drawn based on a photographic reference that I provided to the illustrator.

Strategy 4: Documentary evidence

I provided documentary evidence by including fact boxes such as a brief description of the main procedures of PRP (see Figure 1, panel 2) and hyperlinks to Jessica's Instagram business page (Figure 1, panel 1) and the SkinPen® website (Figure 1, panel 2).

Strategy 5: The meta-story

Elements used to create a comic are its meta-story such as the research methods, sources, interviewees, or the background of the writer or illustrator.

My comic's meta-story includes the date that the interview took place and the biographies of the interviewee, the illustrator, and the writer (see Figure 1, panel 3).

Conclusion

Our culture of immediacy propelled by 24/7 access to technology, and the changes in literacy from text to visuals make now an opportune time for medical writers to adopt graphic medicine as a communication medium. Graphic medicine – the hybrid of comics and healthcare discourse – is a provocative medium with the power to reach a broad audience of all ages, all languages, and all cultures. Medical writers can break the stigma that comics are for kids by being transparent about the creation process, from disclosing the writer's presence, to illustrating persons and places in their likeness, to divulging the behind-the-scenes procedures that brought the comic from concept to reality.

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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