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“Graphic Medicine: Comics as a Therapeutic and Teaching Tool in Gynecologic Oncology Clinics”

Graphic medicine, a coin termed by Dr. Ian Williams in 2007, is a relatively new field that merges the disciplines of medicine and graphic narratives. Through the visual medium of comics and graphic novels, these healthcare stories give voice to patient narratives. Because the discipline explores health topics through the visual aid of comics, it may have greater appeal for visual learners and can serve to reinforce healthcare providers’ verbal discussions. This reinforcement may be especially helpful for simplifying and explaining complex topics, such as chemotherapy. Also, this type of educational material may be more accessible for a patient audience with low literacy rates or language barriers. Louisiana has an average reading level of 4th grade, significantly below that of the national average, so having to parse the medical jargon and complicated paragraphs of many typical informational brochures may be particularly detrimental to this patient population.

As such, this project aims to investigate the potential usefulness of comics as a therapeutic and teaching tool for patients in gynecologic oncology clinics. The ultimate objective is to create a narrative about a patient with a newly diagnosed cancer. Through a series of comics, readers will follow this cancer patient through her initial diagnosis and cancer journey. Along the way, the story will explore topics such as coping strategies, helpful resources, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and clinical trials, to name a few potential options. These pamphlets will be distributed in various oncology clinics, and patients will then be surveyed on the efficacy of this educational material.

The initial goal of this research was to create, implement, and collect data on one pamphlet that revolved around the theme of coping with cancer following an initial diagnosis. Phase I (Comic Creation) involved interviewing and conducting focus groups with gynecologic oncologists, oncology nurses and staff, and oncology patients to determine patient need and the direction of comic development. A first draft of the comic was produced, and readability was tested using the Flesch-Kincaid readability and Flesch literacy tests. A second round of focus groups was conducted before the final version of the comic was created. A last review of the comic concluded Phase I.

Phase II (Field Testing) will involve recruiting participants from several oncology practices, gathering demographic data, and distributing a pre-intervention questionnaire to assess patients’ initial anxiety levels (via the STAI scale) and knowledge level (via KORSET-like tests). After patients are given adequate time to read and review the comic, a post-intervention questionnaire will be distributed to assess both change in anxiety level and knowledge level as well as the comic’s perceived relatability, likability, and helpfulness.