

## **Graphic Medicine and Its Application: Patient Perspectives**

**Tony Pickering**

*Medical Artist*

**Tony Pickering, a medical artist and illustrator working in medical communications, presented a compelling overview of what the field of Graphic Medicine (GM) is, and its impact from a patient's perspective.**

Entering the field of illustration later in life, his career shift was deeply personal, prompted by his diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes at age 40. This experience catalysed his engagement with GM, a field that combines comics with healthcare to explore and communicate the experiences of illness and healing.

### **What is Graphic Medicine?**

Graphic Medicine, a term coined in 2007 by Dr Ian Williams, is an interdisciplinary domain where comics are used as tools for:

- Storytelling
- Education
- Advocacy in health

Initially taken up by scholars, educators, and clinicians, GM has expanded to include patients, caregivers, and artists. Its core strength lies in using visual narratives to challenge traditional medical discourse, often dominated by clinical detachment, and instead highlight the lived realities of illness and care.

One notable work in the field is *The Bad Doctor* by Williams, a graphic novel that merges the experiences of a practicing GP with bipolar disorder.

### **Diabetes: Year One — A Personal Journey**

Mr Pickering's personal contribution to this field is his graphic novel *Diabetes: Year One*, which documents his first year following diagnosis.

The novel reflects not just medical facts, but emotional and psychological aspects of adapting to a chronic condition.

Mr Pickering emphasises that comics allow for a slower, reflective form of information processing. Unlike checklists or pamphlets, comics invite readers to absorb content at their own pace.

Through sequential storytelling, Mr Pickering visually explores key milestones in his journey as a patient, such as:

- The “first moment of becoming a patient, which is an identity moment”
- Recognising early symptoms
- “The first conversation with the doctor about the diagnosis”
- Experiencing hyperglycaemia — depicted as a “freight train” crashing through the body or through slow, immersive panels that mirror gradual symptom onset
- Living with diabetes — “trying to understand how the geography of the world around you changes”

By turning these moments into visual narratives, Mr Pickering not only processes his own reality but also provides a relatable and educational resource for others.

These metaphorical and literal illustrations offer nuanced insights into what it means to live with diabetes—insights that are often inaccessible in standard medical communication.

### **Broader Contributions**

Mr Pickering has also highlighted several other projects he has collaborated on, such as:

- Daisy W. Shaw’s illustrated narrative *Abandoning Daydreams of a Life Without Diabetes* (Welcome Collection)
  - Explores themes of bodily autonomy, the stigma of insulin injections, and the psychological adjustments required to live with a lifelong condition
- LAIB (Long-Acting Injectable Buprenorphine) case study
  - **Used transcripts from a heroin substitution trial to visually depict participants’ experiences**
  - **Illustrations offered “acclimatisation advice” — helping users and practitioners understand and empathise with the recovery process**

### **Ongoing Work**

Ongoing projects include:

- Underdoctoring Data Visualisation – in collaboration with Lancaster University on visualising medical training pathways
- The Life & Soul: Comics and Public Health initiative – **addressing male suicide through comics**

## **Final Thoughts**

Finally, Tony Pickering emphasised again how Graphic Medicine bridges art and healthcare, providing a uniquely accessible and emotionally resonant platform for patients and professionals alike.

**Summary by Irena Ivanova MD**