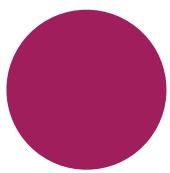
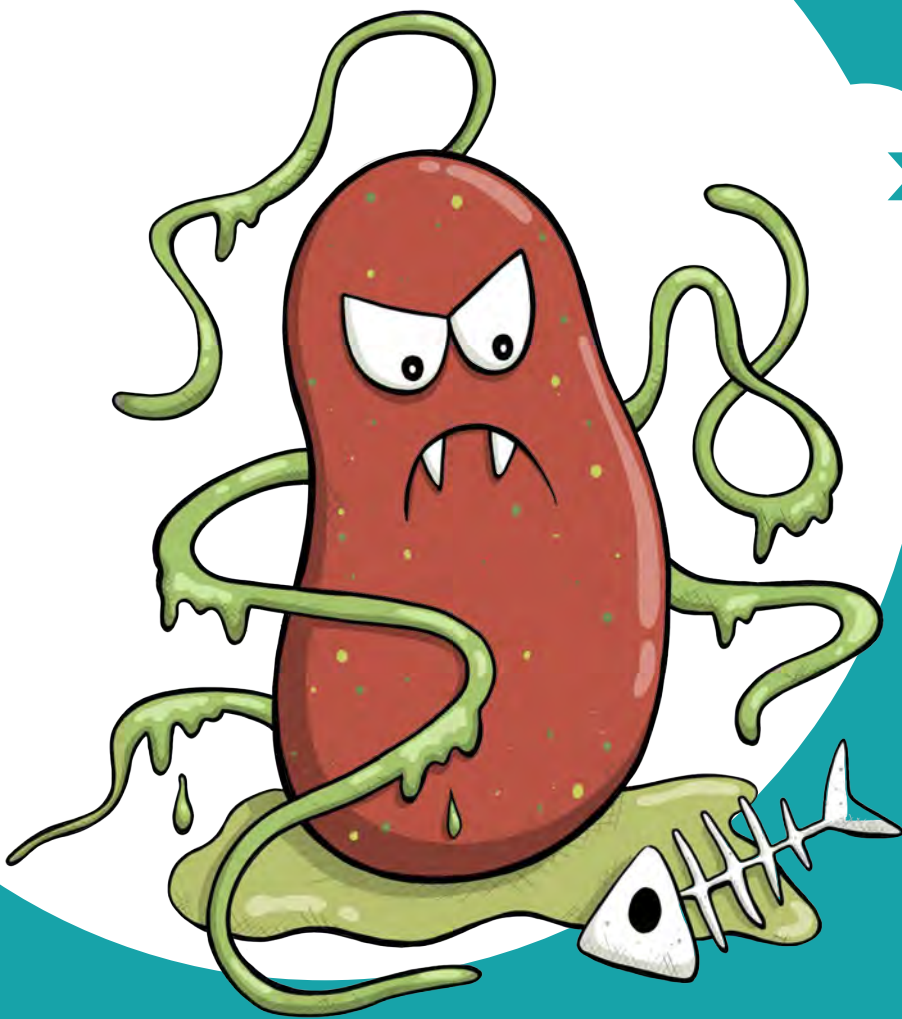




90'ten Creative Review

August 2023





Disease with personality!

'Anthropomorphism' is the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to non-human entities – be that a pathogen, a disease or your shoe.

Despised by many a scholar as a childish distraction from fact and reality, recent evidence suggests that anthropomorphism can actually be a fantastic tool for engagement and education, and is an important coping strategy in the face of illness and uncertainty.

Love it or hate it, it's a fundamental way in which we as humans connect to and make sense of our world.



I've personally found that what may seem like silly characters can be a great hook – they offer an eye-catching, accessible way to convey complex ideas and start conversations. They shine when communicating with children and the general public, but they also have their place in communicating with scientists and medics – we're all humans at the end of the day!

In this issue, we take a look at some great examples of anthropomorphism in the healthcare world, along with touching on some of the evidence for the benefits of the approach.

Thanks for having me for the August edition of the Creative Review :)

Dionne Turnbull





Illustration by John Leech in Punch Magazine, 1858

The Great Stink

Putting a face on disease has been used as a tool for over a hundred years to help raise awareness – in this case, of the need to provide proper sanitation and save London from epidemics of diphtheria, scrofula and cholera.

With the Thames full of sewage, and the death rate at its highest since the Black Death, this illustration from 1858 shows an understanding that the water was somehow to blame, although the waterborne nature of cholera wasn't fully accepted until several years later.

Science and medicine have come a long way since then, but the depiction of '[Father Thames Introducing his Offspring to the Fair City of London](#)' is still eerie and evocative.

Could this historical illustration style be used to add gravitas and convey the lengthy battle with diseases that we are still fighting today?

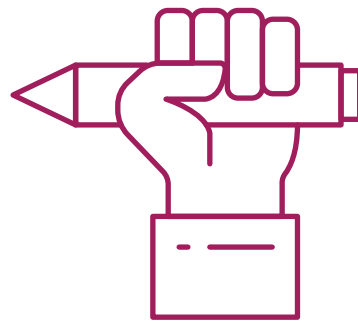


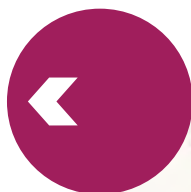
Illustration by Yevgenia Nayberg

Knowing the enemy

More recently, humanising disease has been proposed as a new [public health tool](#), based on a [study](#) examining the impact of disease anthropomorphism on health guideline compliance.

Using COVID-19, yellow fever and breast cancer as examples, researchers found that people were more likely to comply with health recommendations such as vaccination or risk screening when the disease was described in anthropomorphic terms. Feeling closer to a disease led to increased feelings of vulnerability, so responders were more likely to take action.

In cases of preventable disease where the problem isn't necessarily lack of awareness but lack of compliance, could an engaging campaign with disease as the main character help to encourage people to take the necessary steps to protect their health? Having something tangible to overcome could be a powerful motivator.





The city within

This beautiful series of illustrations accompanies the article ["Inside Micropolis"](#), which explores our gut microbiota and the connections to health and disease. Using the concept of a bustling city, author Amanda Fronk describes the productive citizens, devious crooks, and visiting tourists that frequent our innards, with bacteria outnumbering all of the cells in the human body.

Storytelling like this makes the microscopic detail of the human body captivating and relatable. We all know that they aren't really driving cars down there, but the comparison helps us to connect and appreciate the delicate balance and complexity.

Could drug mode-of-action, or mechanism of disease content be made more accessible by relating it to aspects of our daily human lives?

Illustration by
John S. Dykes



Toxic friendship

["Down and Out Kidney"](#) by [Horizon Therapeutics](#) highlights the damaging effects of uric acid accumulation and gout in people with chronic kidney disease.

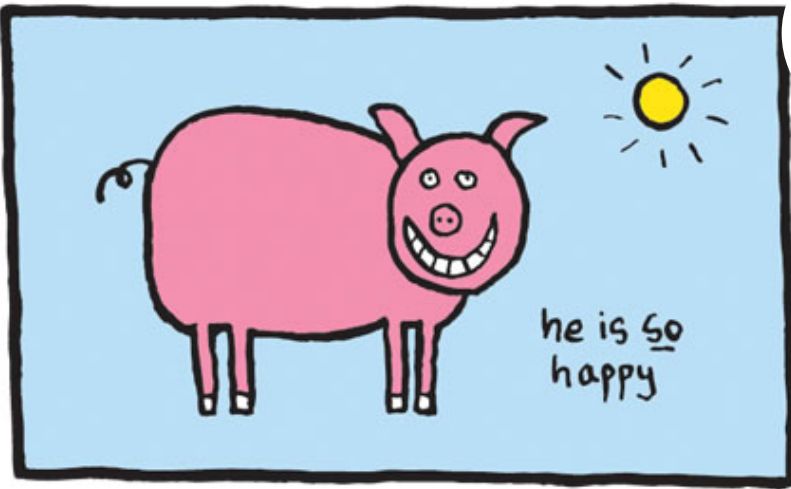
It tells the story of a cute little kidney who, in a moment of poor judgement, befriends uric acid... putting not only himself in danger, but also his friends hand, foot, bone and heart.

The video was launched for National Kidney Month, communicating a clinical story to nephrologists in an engaging, emotive way. Part of a set of HCP resources for the [Don't Fail Kidney™](#) campaign, which includes an illustrated brochure as well as a clinical discussion of the video, it shows the value of combining different approaches to strengthen a story.

A sprinkle of humour can have a big impact – cartoons aren't just for kids!



THE PIG OF HAPPINESS



May his JOYFUL SMILE remind us how much there is to be HAPPY about

'The Pig of Happiness' by Giles Andreae
(aka Edward Monkton)

Lets be friends

When it comes to chronic illness, sometimes the best approach is to down swords and make friends with it.

This was certainly my experience after being diagnosed with epilepsy as a teenager. As a tribute to my favourite animal, seizures became 'pigs', anti-seizure medication became 'pig-pills', and my seizure diary was full of snout icons. A bit odd perhaps, but it totally shifted my perception of the disease (and probably confused a lot of people on the streets of Edinburgh when they found me recovering and mumbling about farm animals...).

It let me keep 'me' separate from my illness, and brought some much-needed humour.

'The Pig of Happiness' by Giles Andreae became a symbol of finding the good stuff in amongst the mud.



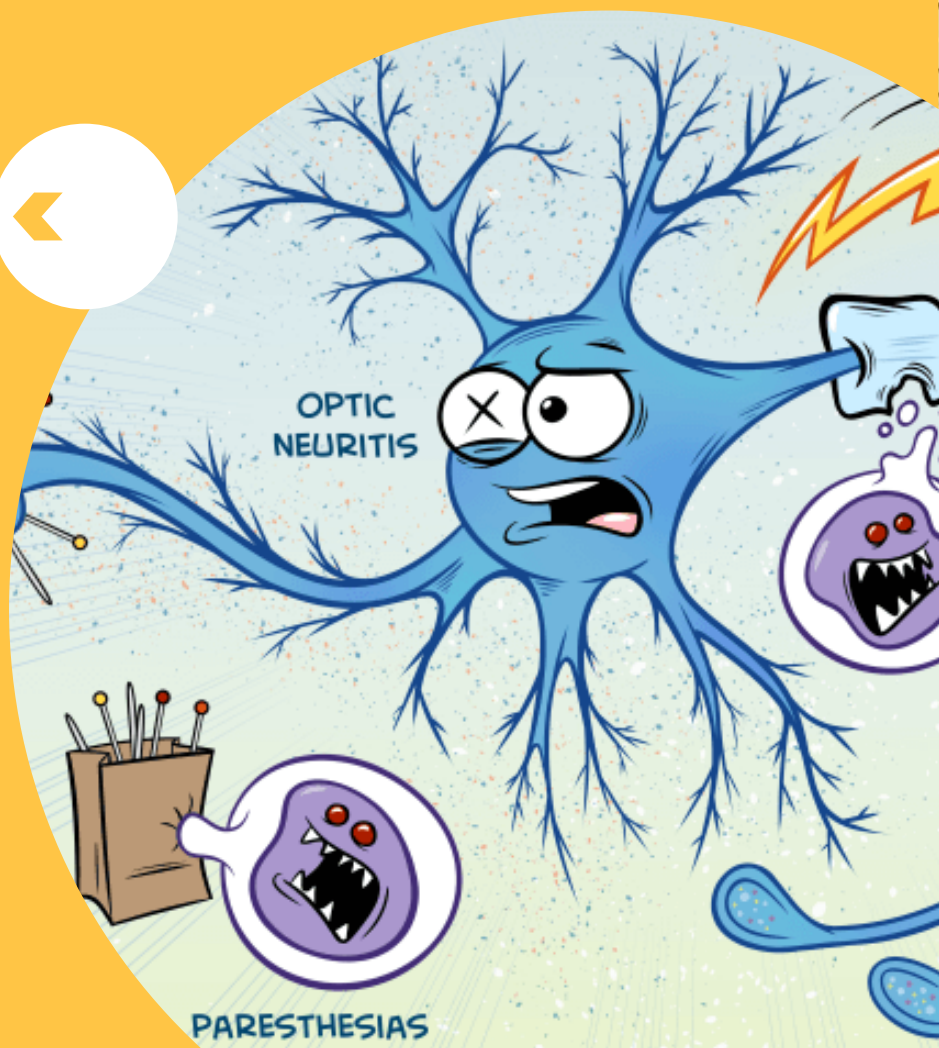
'Multiple Sclerosis'
by Jorge Muniz

The same but different

As it turns out, my approach wasn't new – ['Illness Personification Theory'](#) describes the way in which individuals with chronic illness ascribe human traits to their condition in a positive or negative frame, with important implications for psychological adaptation.

Many patients have found immense benefit in personifying their illness, be that [cancer](#), [autoimmune disease](#) or [eating disorders](#), and the approach has been formally studied in [multiple sclerosis](#) and [chronic pain](#).

Could we connect more deeply with the patient experience by asking not just what a disease does to them, but *who it is* to them? Gathering stories of how patients relate to their condition on a personal level could make for an insightful campaign.





Strike a pose

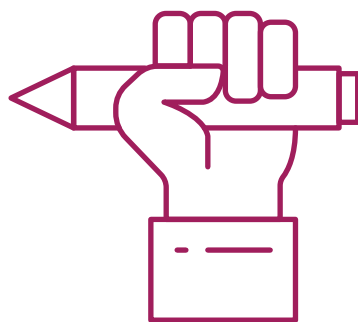
In a multi-year campaign, [Taiwan Centers for Disease Control](#) collaborated with prominent anime artists to personify a range of infectious diseases, with the goal of raising disease awareness among those under 35.

These were designed as cover art for 'Disease' magazine, and enjoyed [viral success](#) online, later being featured in a desk calendar.

While the campaign received some criticism, with accusations that it made light of deadly diseases, it was undeniably eye-catching and memorable, and ultimately achieved what it set out to do.

Provocative work such as this tends to generate a strong reaction – a reminder that we should always test ideas with the target audience to ensure that we have the tone right.

'Whooping Cough'
Taiwan CDC



'Post-traumatic stress disorder' by Toby Allen

Monsters in our midst

No tour of health-related anthropomorphism would be complete without featuring the stunning work of UK-based artist Toby Allen.

His series ['Real Monsters'](#) aims to reduce the stigma around mental illness, and educate on less well-known conditions. Originally part of his own healing process, these powerful illustrations have been featured in many online and print publications, and are offered as resources for teaching and therapy.

Giving a face to invisible illness turns it into something tangible, allowing people to think about a condition in a different way – an approach that may be beneficial not only for patients, but for family, carers and health professionals that share the journey.



Intruder! DESTROY!

Wh-what?

But I'm one of you!!

Don't listen to her!



Anthropomorphism can give a face and personality to a condition that might otherwise feel intangible; can empower patients and provide them with a 'villain' to fight or a 'stranger' to get to know; and can help HCPs and patients to visualise complex mechanisms of disease.

We hope we've convinced you that making health and disease a little bit more human can be a fantastic communication tool!

Thank you!

