



USING COMICS TO SUPPORT PEOPLE LIVING WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES

Being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes can be a confusing and difficult experience, especially for young adults and children

Dr Mayank Patel and Professor Partha Kar have collaborated with Revolve Comics to create an exciting online comic book series on type 1 diabetes. We spoke to Dr Patel to learn more about his experience developing the comics.

Can you tell us more about the comics, the idea behind their development and their purpose?

In 2014 a good colleague and friend of mine, Prof Partha Kar and I were discussing nerdy stuff – movies, sci-fi and those sorts of things. We’d both heard stories from people with type 1 diabetes and about when they were first diagnosed as children and how it could all feel quite impersonal. They’d be given medical leaflets, or their parents were given a medical leaflet and they received nothing. It could also be quite difficult for them to seek advice and information in a way that would work for them.

Our idea was to create something novel, something visually striking, but not take away from the seriousness of type 1 diabetes and find a way to approach a serious issue through a different vehicle.

How were comics chosen as the platform for this educational messaging?

Think about some superhero characters we’ve grown to love, for example, the Incredible Hulk. He finds himself in a situation that he doesn’t want and tries to find the cure. He finds it challenging and frustrating even though he accepts his situation.

With type 1 diabetes, there is a parallel with other superhero stories as well as the Hulk, but he is one of the most well-known. I think of it as someone who finds themselves in a situation with newly acquired powers. They have abilities or something that makes them different from everybody else.

We just wanted to add to that suite of resources out there in a different way through the comics.

We noticed many people contributed to the development of the comics. Who is currently involved in their development, and who helped shape the stories?

When we first began, Partha floated the idea on social media to see who might be interested in doing comic books for education on type 1 diabetes.

We never felt we could tell someone else’s story of having type 1 diabetes on their behalf. It had to be told from a personal, lived experience. Individuals had put themselves forward, sharing personal parts of their stories and lives, and we chose elements that we felt were a good representation or could reflect other people’s situations without breaking confidence. We wanted to turn those difficult challenges into something positive – not by celebrating them – but by giving others something they could relate to.

As far as I know, Partha’s not an accomplished artist, nor am I – though I did get a grade B in GCSE art! And to bring these words and stories to life, you need imagery. Very fortunately, Partha met Danny from Revolve Comics. To develop comics with a professional comic book company who have specialised in healthcare conditions for the last eight years has been amazing.

“ Our idea was to create something novel, something visually striking, but not take away from the seriousness of type 1 diabetes...” ”



Do you use the comics in your clinical practice and how do you recommend healthcare professionals use them?

Our hospitals are teaching hospitals, and I also teach medical students. As part of my undergraduate lectures, I always signpost to these when I do a type 1 talk or lecture.

We used some charity funds to print hard copies of the comics as an alternative to just reading online. We never want to charge for these, so they'll always be free online. These are a labour of love, and we've loved developing them.

I oversee the adult insulin pump service in Southampton, so for any new patients who join us from the children's team, I offer them hard copies of the comics, as an icebreaker. I often say something like, "oh, by the way, do you like comic books?" Their faces light up just by looking at the cover. Just that immediate emotional response is really humbling and so lovely to see. They go, "wow, this is great. I can't wait to read this," or "I can't wait to share this with my family or my friends."

That's the best place I think it's landed for me clinically. My approach to clinical care is very conversational. When I see a patient in the clinic or on the ward with type 1 diabetes, I break the ice and might comment on their Star Wars or a Superman T-shirt that they're maybe wearing. I ask them about their hobbies or favourite movie or that sort of thing.

How were the topics included in the comics chosen?

The first one had to be "What is type 1? Where's it come from?" 'Origins.' This was deliberately chosen as the title, based on the X-Men superhero origins comic theme, where someone's story begins. In subsequent volumes – without

too many spoilers – Partha and I tried to pick themes that we both encounter clinically and that people often ask questions about. This includes themes around low sugars, high sugars, travel, health, alcohol, etc. We essentially tried to pick common type 1 topics and give them an interesting narrative.



What role do you think healthcare professionals have in helping people who are newly diagnosed find and get peer support – highlighted in volume 1?

The coronavirus pandemic has made it very hard to get face-to-face contact with healthcare professionals. I think that it's critical to signpost individuals to relevant peer support.

Equally, I'm mindful that some social media can be a forum for showing off. But what works for one might not work for all, and could potentially breed insecurity and resentment. We've got a body of individuals sharing expertise and ideas and it can be reassuring and helpful for some if they're interested in that way of doing things. But it's not for everyone.

The comics are one example, but

charities like Diabetes UK are an important asset and resource. With so much information is out there, I think that the role of a professional is to signpost individual to the relevant and trusted online information, as well as connecting with the right groups of people.

But equally, we can't police the internet for them, but instead encourage caution as the internet is filled with a lot of untruths and dangerous inaccuracies.

In volume 2, there was a deliberate medication error added – why did the authoring team think this was important to include?

It's very easy to present everything as fluffy, light and great and say nothing ever goes wrong. But we all know the real world is not like that. So, this is our metaphor for the real world.

Partha and I are both heavily involved in inpatient diabetes care, both developing services and delivering care to people with diabetes. I think it's important to tell an honest, open story because in the real world, there are people living with type 1 reporting terrible hospital experiences. We can't ignore that or gloss over it. ▶



ARTWORK: REVOLVE COMICS



Why is it important to use appropriate language when referring to diabetes stigma as mentioned in volume 3?

I'd like to think we live in kinder, more accepting times. I think the Language Matters document that was launched a few years ago, is an essential read for the diabetes community. Since I read that, I've definitely changed how I talk about diabetes.

I remind people how hard diabetes is to live with and the fact that patients don't get very much support outside of hospital care. Healthcare professionals should not use their personal prejudices in a brief meeting with a patient to make judgements about



that person's life. It's unfair, so I try to challenge that as well.

How do people contribute to or share their ideas?

I guess the easiest way people can contribute is probably with their ideas on the narrative. Both Partha and I have Twitter accounts and people can tweet us directly on their ideas and thoughts at Mayank@mbrp1 and Partha@parthaskar.



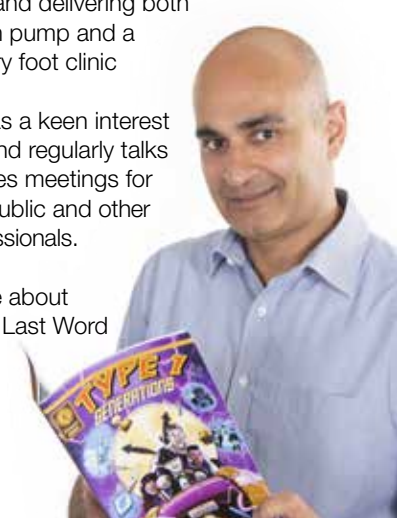
More on Dr Mayank Patel

Dr Mayank Patel has been a Consultant in Diabetes in Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, UK, since 2008. During that time, he has been the clinical lead for his hospital's diabetes service and supports other hospital-based diabetes services. He is also a Diabetes UK Clinical Champion.

Mayank has worked tirelessly to develop the Inpatient Diabetes Service, which has helped raise standards of care and the profile of diabetes across his hospital. He was instrumental in developing and delivering both an adult insulin pump and a multidisciplinary foot clinic in the hospital.

Mayank has a keen interest in education and regularly talks at local diabetes meetings for patients, the public and other diabetes professionals.

Read more about Dr Patel in the Last Word on page 38.



Further information

Revolve Comics are free to download at: revolvecomics.com/read-diabetes-type-1-comics/

Language matters – read more about language and diabetes at: england.nhs.uk/publication/language-matters-language-and-diabetes/

Resources

My life – a guide to type 1 diabetes for kids - is a free guide to helping children understand their condition. You can order copies from our website at: diabetes.org.uk/up-my-life-guide

Clinical Champion

Become a diabetes Clinical Champion for us

Work with us and other healthcare professionals and learn about how to transform diabetes care locally, regionally and nationally. Find out more at: diabetes.org.uk/up-clinical-champions-networks