

Communicating with children

- 1 To what extent do you think that using animations can help children under seven understand health information more easily? Give examples of any experience you may have had of this.

Getting animated about medicine

Can a cartoon character help relay health information to children?

You don't have to be a parent, paediatrician, or child psychiatrist to recognise the power of a strong and loveable popular character with whom children can identify. There can scarcely be an adult left in the land who when asked, "Can we fix it?" wouldn't know the appropriate, "Yes we can!" response to yell back. But now it could be time for Bob the Builder, along with Fireman Sam and Postman Pat, to move over. Welcome instead the cheery, boyish figure of Dr Dan.

Dr Dan has just won the Medical Futures Best Innovation in Health Communication Award for his co-creators, paediatrician Dr Veronica Kinsler, ophthalmologist Dr Eoin O'Sullivan, and their lawyer spouses. If all goes according to plan, then Dr Dan, like Sam, Pat, and Bob, is set for a future captivating the imagination of the under 7s. He will feature across the media, in books, on television, and on the web – he already has a website (www.doctor-dan.com) – as well as a host of "merchandising" opportunities.

Unlike Sam, Pat, and Bob, though, the intention is that Dr Dan will be more than just entertainment for the under 7s. As Dr O'Sullivan explains: "First, when we came up with the idea of Dr Dan, we just saw there was no animated medical character for children and thought we could create one as well as anybody else, so why not have a go? Then, as both doctors and parents, we thought, Gosh, wouldn't it be nice if the character could help reduce childhood anxieties, if children could get to know a character on TV as a friendly doctor so that when they go to a real doctor it wouldn't be such a frightening and strange experience?"

The team envisages Dr Dan demystifying blood tests, biopsies, injections, and a host of other nasties children might face in a general practitioner's surgery or hospital, by featuring in health education leaflets and videos. They hope a Dr Dan website might give child-friendly information about conditions, and Dr Dan Bravery Badges be a welcome reward after treatment. Most importantly, they expect Dr Dan, accompanied by his sidekicks Sally Stethoscope, Beep the Thermometer and Morag the Old [doctor's] Bag, can help assuage any fears they may hold.

Julie Barlow, professor of health psychology and director of the Interdisciplinary Research Centre in Health at Coventry University, agrees. She notes that a project at Birmingham Children's Hospital that evaluated communication tools used to explain issues to children with idiopathic arthritis showed that cartoon characters could be a helpful means of relaying health information.

However, at a time when female entrants to medical school are now in the majority and those from an ethnic minority also have a strong presence, Professor Barlow raises a quizzical eyebrow at the traditional white, male trappings of the Dr Dan character. She also expresses some concern at his white coat, citing anecdotal evidence that the garment can raise fears in children. But she says, "Health communication for children is, on the whole, poor at the moment. Although younger children can't express that, it's something that older children when interviewed do say could be improved. So anything that reduces anxiety has to be good – even if it is a white male in a white coat."

Before mapping out any health education role for Dr Dan his creators want to release him in an entertainment setting. Only once he has embedded himself firmly in children's hearts do they feel that his educative potential can be fully exploited. "We hope that the health education role can be hidden from children for a while," explains Dr Kinsler. "Then we can pull it out of the bag when he's already popular."

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- 2 The creators of the character feel that Dr Dan should be launched firstly as an entertainment figure and that his potential for providing health information should only be exploited once the character has been established. What advantages and possible disadvantages do you see with this approach ?
- 3 Do you think the issues which Professor Barlow raises about Dr Dan being a white male and wearing a white coat are valid ones?
- 4 To what extent do you think that focusing on the doctor's role, to the exclusion of other healthcare workers, is an issue? How might this be addressed?
- 5 The creators have come up with a number of characters to represent items a doctor might use: *Sally stethoscope*, *Beep the thermometer* and *Morag the doctor's bag*. What other items do you think could be represented and what names would you suggest?