



Jul 25, 2013 00:00 BST

Comic books to help children understand chronic pain

Comic book superheroes are being used to help children understand more about older relatives suffering from chronic pain, in an innovative project.

Northumbria University academic Dr Derek Jones has been working on a project led by Teesside University Professor Denis Martin to explore how comic book superheroes can help children understand what an older adult with chronic pain is experiencing.

The research project, also involving colleagues from the universities of

Dundee, Aberdeen, and Greenwich, has seen the academics work with Medikidz – an international company which produces award-winning comics featuring Marvel-inspired superheroes to put medical information into plain words which children can understand – to create a comic book about chronic pain.

The comic is one of the products from a collaboration between the university partners in the UK Research Council-funded £1.2 million EOPIC (Engaging with Older People and Their Carers to Develop Interventions for the Self-management of Chronic Pain) Project.

Dr Derek Jones, Senior Lecturer in Occupational Therapy at Northumbria University, said: “Education about pain is really important; it is increasingly recognised that explaining to people the biological processes underlying their experience results in better pain management.

“We will be carrying out research to investigate the value of the Medikidz comic book; from what we have been told so far we think it will prove to be helpful to anyone who comes into contact with someone with chronic pain.”

Professor Martin, from Teesside University, said: “The idea for the comic came about as we were talking to older people to find out their ideas on how to improve the lives of older people living with chronic pain. We learned that there was a need to help grandchildren to better understand the experiences of a grandparent living with chronic pain.

“It can be difficult for a child to understand because they can’t see the pain which is making their grandparent miserable and feeling unable to do day-to-day things. We wanted to use that information to develop a product which would help younger relatives understand what the older person is going through, given the lack of information available to help that communication.”

Medikidz already produces material to explain to children about their own medical conditions, but working with the EOPIC team, they focused on material to inform a child about the older relative’s condition.

The book, entitled ‘What’s Up with Moira’s Grandad: Medikidz Explains Chronic Pain’, portrays a typical scenario, which involves a child not understanding why their grandparent has suddenly cancelled time they’d

planned to spend with them. The child is left upset, thinking the grandparent simply isn't bothered - while the grandparent is frustrated and angry at having felt forced to cancel due to difficulty in coping with chronic pain.

The EOPIC team provided the information and outline of the story to Medikidz, who adapted it to use their superheroes to tell the story. In the story the child is taken on a journey through the human body, with the Medikidz superheroes explaining about chronic pain and how it impacts on someone's life. The happy conclusion shows the child with a better understanding of their grandparent's situation.

The team now plans to distribute the comics to clinics across the region initially and then to expand nationally and further afield.

Date posted: July 25, 2013

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