The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into stark relief the contrast between making decisions for populations vs individuals, and the challenge of protecting vulnerable members within a community when doing so conflicts with personal freedoms. Two of the best graphic medicine books published in 2022 don’t resolve the conflict but expertly address these 2 frames of moral reasoning.

Clinical Ethics: A Graphic Medicine Casebook, by Kimberly R. Myers, Molly L. Osborne, and Charlotte A. Wu with illustrations by Zoe Schein, is the first English-language casebook on bioethics to be published in comics format. Others have also been working in the domain, notably Monica Lalanda, an emergency department physician in Spain who published a Spanish-language book on this topic, and Craig Klugman, who has created a website to host his bioethics comics.

The book depicts common ethical dilemmas within hospitals and clinics—largely focusing on collisions between the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and nonmaleficence—within 8 chapters composed of a comics-format ethics case followed by a brief framing essay and questions for discussion. The chapter topics—autonomy, informed consent, unconscious bias, mandated reporting of suspected abuse, confidentiality, medical mistakes, advance care planning, and futility—will be familiar to clinicians and students of clinical ethics, but as a comics-based guide they attend not only to the reasoning aspects of vexing conundrums but also to the emotional experiences of the stakeholders, offering new ways to engage readers and stimulate them to see impasses differently.

For example, the chapter on advance care planning presents the all-too-common scenario of an elderly parent on a ventilator who is unable to communicate, while her 2 adult children argue about whether to continue or withdraw life support. The narrative comics format brings the reader into the lives of the characters; in one panel we see the patient’s grown children rehashing old resentments and arguing over what to do and in another, we get a peek behind the curtain as the ICU team deliberates next steps (Figure 1). Here and elsewhere the book doesn’t pretend to address all the complex nuances of surrogate decision-making and advance care planning, but it does capture something essential about the challenges facing families, clinicians, and ethics consultants: the human stories, the competing narratives, and the uncertainty about outcomes, with the patient front and center.

Unlike most ethics texts that tend to present cases using an omniscient and detached narrator, passive voice, and the veneer of objectivity, the cases in this book unabashedly reveal a point of view, often showing multiple perspectives via thought bubbles, narrations, and depictions of body language and facial expressions. All this adds narrative depth to the case basics, helping the reader understand the ethical dilemma not only intellectually but also affectively, by “feeling” its weight and burdens. The book is groundbreaking in how it uses comics to challenge, provoke, and educate about ethical issues in the clinical arena.

Graphic Public Health: A Comics Anthology and Road Map, by Meredith Li-Vollmer, also published by Penn State Press,

Figure 1. “Surrogate Decision Making”

is more ambitious than Clinical Ethics, covering 5 domains: health literacy, risk communication, health promotion, advocacy/activism, and how to make comics for public health. Li-Vollmer, a public health specialist working in the Seattle and King County area (in Washington State), has a long career in health communication and has been instrumental in using comics to message what public health is and does. In her new anthology she uses comics to shed light on the debate over health decisions for individuals vs populations not by wading directly into culture wars, but by showing how public health functions in the real world.

In the first chapter on health literacy, Li-Vollmer uses 3 different public health comics (“Home with Flu” about what to do if you have influenza; “Stay Safe in the Heat” about self-care during a heat wave; and “Climate Changes Health” about the health impact of climate change) to show how comics simplify complex information to deliver a particular message to a broad audience. These are not stories for story’s sake. Rather, they have an objective, a rationale, and an intended audience, and Li-Vollmer explains the “how” and “why” of comics in the discussion at the end of each chapter.

The second chapter on risk communication reproduces the eerily prescient 2008 comic “No Ordinary Flu” (written by Li-Vollmer and illustrated by David Lasky for the Seattle and King County Public Health Department), which tells the story of the 1918 flu pandemic to facilitate a “mental rehearsal” for what was then anticipated to be the next, modern-day pandemic. The comic makes clear that we knew what the COVID-19 pandemic would look like, what measures could help mitigate it, and what we could do to protect ourselves; rereading it in 2022 is disquieting. Other comics in the chapter bring the account to the present, telling stories of how the pandemic affected those in the Seattle region, where it made its US debut.

The fourth chapter on advocacy and activism stands out for showing how comics can give voice to those who are not often heard. It reproduces 23 stories from an annual pop-up clinic at the Seattle Center (home of the Space Needle and a professional sports arena) that, for 4 days each year, offers free medical, dental, and vision care to anyone in need. The brief comics, created by some of the region’s finest cartoonists, depict interviews with clinic patients. Employing myriad styles and techniques, the collection exposes readers to heart-wrenching tales of inequality, misfortune, and resilience (Figure 2), a gut-punch that may well leave the reader wondering how it can still be that the richest country in the world doesn’t provide basic health services to its people.

Cartoonist and educator Lynda Barry, in her remarkable book What It Is, observes that “paper and ink have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangementsof lines and shapes, of letters and words on a series of pages make a world we can dwell and travel in.”7 The comics in the 2 books reviewed here do just that and more.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Dr Green reported that he is a professional colleague of Kimberly Myers at Penn State and wrote the foreword to the book Clinical Ethics: A Graphic Medicine Casebook. He also serves on the editorial collective for the Graphic Medicine Series by Penn State Press, which published both books reviewed.