Film
Asthma on screen

Che Guevara, Liza Minnelli, and Greg Louganis can be grouped together with respect to one trait; all have (or had) asthma. The ranks of famous artists, athletes, and philosophers who have the disease prove that asthma is indiscriminate and not a barrier to achievement. However, on television and in movies, asthmatics almost never inhabit the hero role; rather, they are disproportionately relegated to weak or hapless secondary characters, largely fulfilling the stereotype of social outcast. A recent study by Cindy Dell Clark in Medical Anthropology Quarterly argues that, not only is this stigmatisation ill-fitting, it has a powerful influence on the way children with and without asthma relate to the disease.

Asthma is the most common chronic illness in children worldwide and affects about 9% of children in the USA and UK. Although widely perceived to be a minor ailment, asthma is the leading cause for hospital admission for children and can be life-threatening if inadequately managed. Staying in control of asthma requires monitoring by vigilant parents. For many children, however, the biggest liability of asthma is the social burden. Children of all ages compare themselves and their performance with that of peers, and fitting in is paramount. Stopping an activity to receive treatment sets children with asthma apart from others. Not surprisingly, research suggests that children limit the use of asthma medication around their peers.

The pervasiveness of media in children’s lives means that fictional characterisations can be as important as real-life interactions in providing material for constructing identity. Unfortunately, few challenges exist to the widespread portrayal of asthma as funny or pathetic. Such imprudent treatment by screenwriters influences an asthmatic child’s self-image, and the broader cultural perception of the disease. To assess how children interpret negative stereotyping of asthma, Clark systematically categorised the content of 66 movies that contained asthma-related scenes, and interviewed children with and without asthma to compare their reactions.

The most prominent of the recurrent patterns identified by Clark was the portrayal of asthma as a stress response. Even though environmental triggers (allergens and pollutants) are the strongest risk factors for asthma attacks, 42% of the scenes analysed featured attacks precipitated by a stressful event. In most of these scenes, the asthma attack was a dramatic device conveniently used to heighten the tension or suspense of a situation. For example, a scene from The Goonies shows the central character taking a few puffs from his inhaler shortly after an intense encounter with pirates.

After viewing scenes in this category, where tense moments were followed by frantic puffs, children without asthma mainly accepted the implication that stress triggered the attack, even if this was a new idea to them; in this way, the myth of asthma as a psychosomatic condition was perpetuated. Children with asthma were more likely to attribute the attack to an environmental cause, such as dusty air, but they learned that use of an inhaler in response to stress has negative connotations.

Another common theme was the association of asthma with weakness or victimization (in 17% of the scenes analysed). In Toy Story 2, Wheezy the asthmatic penguin has a broken squeaker and seems destined for a yard sale; his only hope is to be rescued by Woody, the protagonist and hero. In Sidekicks, a teenager with asthma is bullied for his inept performance in gym class. As Clark points out, in real life, children with asthma defy this stereotype of helpless, social outcast. They show incredible fortitude and self-reliance, having to make astute judgments about their health and operate life-saving medical devices, all during episodes of restricted breathing capacity.

Clark’s study did not investigate the portrayal of asthmatic episodes on television, although such research is warranted in view of the time children spend watching it. Educational programmes aside (Sesame Street now includes an asthmatic character who helps children understand asthma action plans), the pitfalls of Hollywood’s treatment of asthma are probably mirrored by sitcom writers. In Lost, for example, one character has asthma, but this feature is more about enhancing the plotline than improving character development. Uncertainty over who might have confiscated her medication is a subplot that adds drama.

So should asthma be off limits to the entertainment industry? Comments on social networking sites show that adults with asthma and parents of asthmatic children would like to see the disease portrayed as a normal aspect of a character’s life, rather than as a plot element brought out to symbolise adversity or enhance drama in a crisis. Better attention to detail is also warranted—for example, characters almost never hold in their inhaled dose, or use a spacer.

Hollywood does not have a glorious history of social responsibility when it comes to positive images of characters with long-term medical conditions. Children with asthma are vulnerable to the damaging influence of negative, and inaccurate, stereotyped characteristics. However, the resilience and responsibility they exhibit through daily living with asthma provides armour against media and social attitudes towards the condition.

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