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## Transfusion and Blood Donation in Comic Strips

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### ABSTRACT

The representation of blood transfusion and donation of blood in the comic strip has never been studied. The comic strip, which is a relatively recent art, emerged in the 19th century before becoming a mass medium during the 20th century. We have sought, by calling on collectors and using the resources of Internet, comic strips devoted, wholly or in part, to the themes of transfusion and blood donation. We present some of them here in chronologic order, indicating the title, country of origin, year of publication, and names of authors. The theme of the superhero using transfusion to transmit his virtues or his powers is repeated throughout the 20th century in North American comic strips. More recently, comic strips have been conceived from the outset with a promotional aim. They perpetuate positive images and are directed toward a young readership, wielding humor to reduce the fear of venipuncture. Few comic strips denounce the abuse of the commercialization of products derived from the human body. The image of transfusion and blood donation given by the comic strips is not to be underestimated because their readership is primarily children, some of whom will become blood donors. Furthermore, if some readers are transfused during their lives, the impact of a memory more or less conscious of these childhood readings may resurface, both in hopes and in fears.

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NO OTHER MEDICAL specialty has inspired artists as much as blood transfusion [1–3], in its esthetic (the blood), social (the blood donation), and therapeutic (the transfusion) components. Since the

first experiments, painters, illustrators and photographers have testified to the scientific and technical progress of transfusion [1]. Initially forbidden, blood transfusion ultimately became a symbol of a lifesaving medicine. At the end of the 19th century, its efficacy in the treatment of hemorrhage in soldiers or during childbirth was seen as spectacular, giving the opportunity to witness a miracle. Then, as now, transfusion involves a human in need, a medical professional, and an unselfish blood donor, and this donor can be anyone.

The stream that flows from donor to recipient carries many symbolic representations: life, death, blood, disease, identity, and so on. From the 19th century, cartoonists seized this evocative power to create political allegories, where, for example, transfusion is the ultimate cure to save a weakened democracy [1]. From its birth, the movies exploited also the different scenarios opened by the fascination for this scientific and magical technique, able to defy death at the price of an unprecedented violation of the intimate [2]. This seems an inexhaustible source of inspiration because the history of transfusion evolves and accompanies that of mankind: the medical discoveries, including organ and tissue transplants; the world conflicts, consuming lives and human blood, but also sources of further transfusion progress; the development of volunteering and solidarity in response to the savagery of war; the exploitation of poverty through a modern version of slavery, when human body parts are subject to commercial traffic; and the emergence of dangers drawn from the invisible (or at least of the infinitely small) and from globalization and whose blood is one of the vectors. All these concepts have been used variably in different media: in promotional items such as stamps and posters [4,5] or in various cultural expressions such as art and the movies [1,3–6]. Another cultural field, where the representation of blood transfusion and donation of blood has never been studied, is the comic strip, which is a relatively recent art, having emerged in the 19th century, before becoming a mass medium during the 20th century [6].

We have sought, by calling on collectors and using the resources of Internet [7], comic strips devoted, wholly or in part, to the themes of transfusion and blood donation. We present some of them here in chronological order, indicating the title, country of origin, year of publication, and names of authors.

### **Superman (USA, 1940–1982)**

*Superman. The Construction Racket* (1940) is the fourth story of the comic written by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Paul Cassidy. Lois Lane has been hurt in the collapse of a building, and Clark Kent rushes her to the hospital. The doctors determine that she needs a transfusion, and Clark volunteers to give his blood: “Please test my blood and see if it’s the proper type!” Discretely, Clark has to rip open his own skin to donate blood because no needle can pierce his invulnerable skin. The doctors exclaim: “It’s amazing... Incredible! Your blood conforms to all four types!” (The “four types” of the ABO system had been identified several decades earlier, and the concept of “universal donor” had been known for years.) After the transfusion, Lois recovers her strength almost immediately. Because Clark (and not Superman) is the blood donor, it is logical that Lois does not gain super powers from the transfusion (contrary to She-Hulk, as will be shown). However, she declares to Clark: “I feel stronger than I’ve ever felt!” and offers him her eternal gratitude: “I won’t forget that your blood saved my life!” It is “The End” of the episode.

*Lana Lang Superwoman* is the first story from *Superman’s Girlfriend Lois Lane*, written by Jerry Siegel and illustrated by Curt Swan. Superman offers to give Lana Lang superpowers through a transfusion of his blood. Later, he offers his blood to Lois Lane as well. Because Superman has been called away to another galaxy, he needs 2 superwomen to save the Earth from the plans of Brainiac, the robot who has planned to destroy the Earth in Superman’s absence. With their new superpowers, Lana and Lois could thwart the evil plan. On

the cover, Superman and Lana are lying each on a bed, the blood of one going into the veins of the other, in spite of principle of gravitation (but this blood is “krypton blood!”). The transfusion is immediately effective because Lana says to her blood donor: “The blood transfusion is working, Superman! Look—already I’ve gained x-ray vision!” Superman timed the transfusion effects precisely. After the Earth is saved and Superman has returned to our galaxy, he notes: “I gave each of you just enough Krypton-type blood so that you would have superpowers, until... right this second! Girls, I’m sorry but you are no longer super!”

*Action Comics* no. 403 (1971) is a story of Superman, entitled *Attack of the Micro-Murderer*. It was written by Cary Bates and illustrated by Curt Swan. A malevolent entity named *Zohht* has infected Superman with a microbe powerful enough to challenge his invulnerability. The Kandorian scientists tell Superman that he needs a Kryptonian transfusion. However, he cannot travel to Kandor and Supergirl is of a different blood type. A Kryptonian blood transfusion being thus impossible, the only solution is a transfusion of hundreds of gallons of normal human blood to flush away the infection. Thousands of people respond to a televised appeal, and an enormous bottle of blood is hooked up to a special machine of Superman’s invention. This machine pumps blood through Superman at a tremendous force (“a blood pressure terrific enough to rip apart a 100-foot dam”). On the cover, Superman is shown receiving this huge quantity of human blood, whereas a long line of willing donors come forward.

*The Dying Day of Lois and Lana, from Superman* (1981) was written and drawn by the same authors. Lana Lang accidentally drops an ancient Venetian glass vial, which contains a deadly tropical microbe, and Clark Kent, Lois Lane and Lana are exposed. Superman, who has been exposed to the germ when he was Superboy, has super-antibodies against this agent that killed his parents (“an organic super-serum manufactured by my own blood,” says Superman to himself). He transfuses his blood into both Lois and Lana, and they are almost instantly better (although for reasons not explained, they failed to acquire his superpowers this time). The reader sees an arm-to-arm transfusion, with 2 simultaneous recipients: this is an uncommon operation, even in comics. In the picture, Superman stands and gives his blood from his 2 arms using an apparatus that performs this double transfusion to the 2 lying recipients.

*Clark Gives Blood... Superman Saves Lives, from Superman family* (1982), was written by Bob Rozakis and drawn by John Calnan. Lana Lang is in charge of a blood drive and leads Clark Kent over to the nurse in the donation area. Clark knows that Superman’s skin is impervious to needles. He argues every possible pretext to not donate his blood, but Lana sweeps away his arguments: “I think I’m getting sick to my stomach!—Oh, come now! I’ve been hearing that all my life!—I just remembered! A man on my bus had a bad cold. Kept sneezing the whole trip! I may have caught...—Forget it!—Would you believe I’m allergic to needles?—No.—But I can’t stand the sight of blood!—Don’t worry. You’ll be taking this lying down!”

### **Doctor Nemesis (USA, 1941)**

In *Doctor Nemesis, Lightning Comics* no. 6, *Ace Magazines* (Fig 1), Jim Bradley, the main character, who is both a doctor and a superhero, asks about a wounded man from the surgeon coming out of the operating room. The wounded man has lost a lot of blood, and there is no available blood corresponding to his blood group. Bradley volunteers to give his blood: “Test my blood, Dr. Fowler, it might be right” (it is strange that a doctor such as Bradley does not know his own blood group). The bloods being compatible, the transfusion is performed. Then, 2 nurses help Bradley, weakened by the blood donation, to walk. He apologizes to them: “I feel like a sissy being helped like this.” As if a doctor could not know the nurses explain to him that “it’s only natural to be weak after a blood transfusion.” In the corridor, they meet 2 ambulance drivers, who tell

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