

Can Graphic Design really save your life?

Explore the association of wellbeing and personal growth in design. In your discussion focus on a maximum of three specific areas.

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Word Count: 2,742

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Question: Can Graphic Design really save your life?

“Most people have no idea what graphic design is. Nevertheless, graphic design, whether it’s understood as a profession or not, plays a significant part in saving lives – yet it is inconspicuous in its role.” (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 217)

Graphic design is often overlooked as something purely commercial when it is crucial to our everyday lives. At its core, “design is always oriented to studying people so as to intervene in society to foster change” (Frascara, 2022). Branding and advertisement might play a large part, but it is exactly that, a part and not the whole. Furthermore, even in the context of branding and advertisement, designers have a “social responsibility to guide and provide information”. (The European Conference on Arts, Design & Education, 2022) What is often overlooked or forgotten is that seemingly mundane but necessary forms of visual communication are brought to life by graphic designers. I believe that graphic designers can save lives with their work; this essay serves to highlight the effect graphic designers have, specifically on health and wellbeing; discussing wayfinding and human centred design in hospitals, communication cards and empathy within typography.

Chapter 1: Wayfinding and human centred design in hospitals.

Effective design is crucial in hospitals to promote ease, and good wayfinding and human centred design can be a powerful way of ensuring this. Ineffective wayfinding can increase anxiety whilst also slowing staff. According to “a previous study of a 604-bed tertiary-care hospital... the staff time (excluding the receptionist's time) spent on helping people with wayfinding was equivalent to more than two full-time positions”. (Zimring, 1990, cited by Jamshidi, Hashemi and Tran, 2025) Effective

wayfinding, however, can help ease anxiety, get guests and patients where they need, minimize distractions and improve mood. Kaiser Permanente's work exemplifies how design can be used to elevate "not only the clinical and social experience, but also the emotional experience of patients". (Altringer, 2010)



Fig 1, (CO Architects, n.d., 'Kaiser Permanente San Diego Medical Center')

This image highlights that the hospitals are designed with human experience in mind. The glass walls make use of natural light, and the added natural colour palette brings life and warmth, creating a "positive correlation between exposure to nature and healing". (I+S Design, 2012) Immediately, there is more comfort here than in standard hospitals which tend to appear more sterile and overbearingly white, with artificial lighting. According to GNU Group, who helped design Kaiser Permanente's wayfinding systems, effective wayfinding is "invisible when it works well" and "is not simply operational" but "deeply human." (Taylor, 2025) This is critical in this context

as a hospital's primary focus is saving lives and creating a calming and satisfactory experience for patients and guests, therefore, the design and wayfinding should reflect and reinforce this.

It can't be ignored that designing for a hospital can be extremely challenging as you must cater to all demographics. Kenya Hara's wayfinding for the Umeda Hospital suggests that sometimes keeping hospital design simple and clear is the best solution. Hara's design utilizes red text on white cloth with a clear typeface, decisive use of numbers and simple illustration. The most unique aspect of the design, however, is the consideration towards the constant change in hospitals. The "soft, white cotton" signage "that can be removed, laundered and replaced" (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 98) is the perfect solution to this problem.

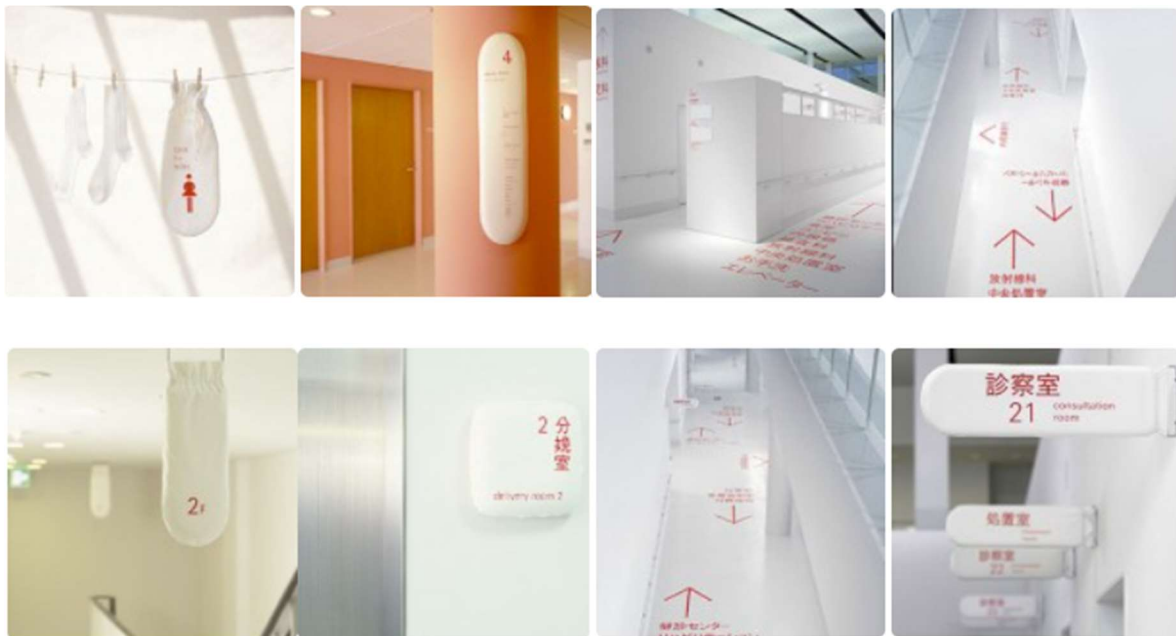


Fig 2, (Spoon & Tamago, 2008, 'Umeda Hospital' and 'Katta Hospital')

This system is effective when departments change location as the cotton covers can be cleaned, swapped and removed with ease. Using cloth also allows for consistent

cleaning and maintenance, showing further consideration for patients and making it even more suitable for a hospital environment. As they are easily moved, there is no need for a redesign which saves money, allowing funding to be redirected towards helping patients. The same design was used in Katta Hospital but Hara also “incorporates arrow length as an indication of distance” here. (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 98) Hara’s work shows that design can be minimal but meaningful and that clear design can help efficiency in hospitals for patients and doctors whilst saving the hospital money that they can then redirect towards important equipment and medical development.

Hospital environments are also extremely taxing for staff. The World Health Organisation reported that “violence in healthcare settings represents about a quarter of violence in all workplaces” (Duff et al., 2023) Studies show that “poor environmental design” (Bosch et al., 2020) increases workplace violence. Reismann (et al. 2023) suggested designing “different waiting rooms so the patients move forward”. (Jacob et al., 2025) The aim would be to reduce frustration and aggression in patients by providing them with physical evidence that they are progressing. Nevertheless, according to El-Hadedy and El-Husseiny (2022), for this idea to work, “clear signage” is “essential”. (Jacob et al., 2025) This statement highlights the importance of wayfinding as a foundation. The UK’s Design Council and Department of Health’s research in 2012 found that “what most frustrated patients was a lack of information”. (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 92) In response, “PearsonLloyd created a comprehensive” wayfinding system that also “informs and orientates patients”. (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 92)

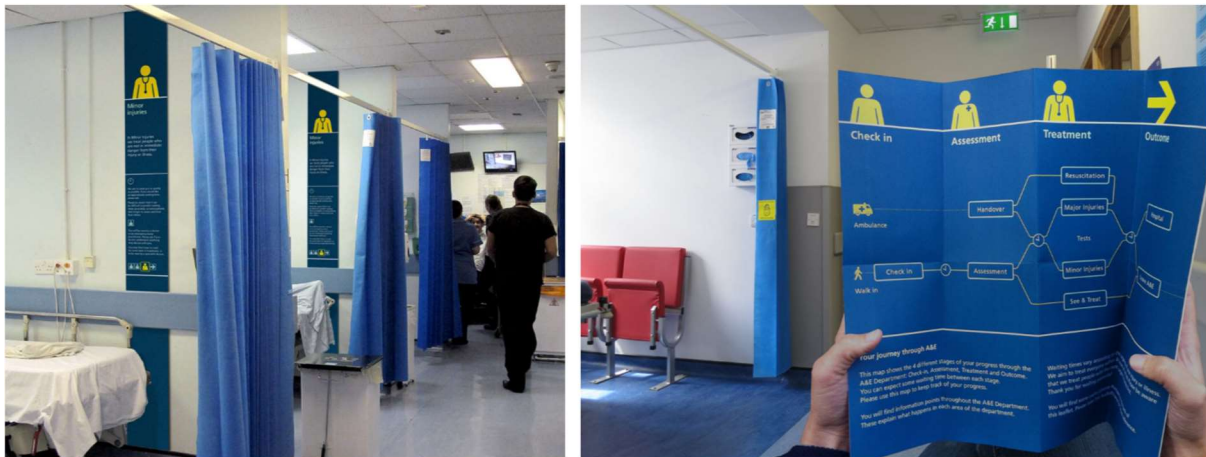


Fig 3, (PearsonLloyd, n.d., 'Department of Health A Better A&E')

Even though Kenya Hara's work serves as an example that minimalism in wayfinding design can be better, PearsonLloyd's design argues the counterpart. Part of the frustration that comes with visiting hospitals and A&E is the constant waiting and being left in the dark. This additional stage of interaction with patients keeps them consistently educated about the process. Because of this, they are less likely to be irritated when interacting with staff and have fewer questions. The director of PearsonLloyd, Tom Lloyd, stated that "there was a 50 percent reduction in the aggressive incidents across the two hospitals after the implementation." (Griffiths, 2013) This statistic is a testament to the power of design and proves that this wayfinding device may have helped save people's lives by creating a safer working environment and saving time.

Chapter 2: Communication Cards.

There is often a communication barrier in medical environments which can be caused by language, disability, age or condition. The Office for National Statistics for England and Wales claim that, “nearly 4.1% of the London population report they are unable to speak English well... compared with a national average of 1.3%; with 0.3% of... England and Wales reporting that they cannot speak English at all.” (Canoso, D’Souza and Smith, 2021) Effective communication is an essential part of treatment and helps keep the process efficient. Kings College Hospital did a trial creating communication cards for 10 commonly spoken languages and “two of five patients” reported “increased satisfaction postchart”. (Canoso, D’Souza and Smith, 2021) Results of the experiment show that patients felt more understood whilst also having a better understanding of their own diagnosis. Experiencing pain and visiting hospital is stressful enough without adding the frustration of difficulty communicating. The cards serve to inspire ease within patients and help the process run smoother. In a literal sense, these cards have the power to help save lives by discovering the root of problems quicker and hastening the journey to a solution. However, it is possible the cards also have the power save lives through the way they connect with people, making them feel cared for and understood.

“Dementia can” also “affect language processing and production,” (Clare, Collins and Hunt, 2022) therefore, visual aids and communication cards can have a really positive effect. People suffering with dementia often have difficulty forming words and struggle with “fluency of speech and understanding”. (Asirot et al., 2022) Alzheimer’s Disease International recorded that in 2020 “over 55 million people” were living with

dementia and they predict that the amount will continue to “almost double every 20 years” and reach “139 million” by 2050, highlighting the rising need for visual communication in hospitals. (Alzheimer’s Disease International, n.d.) While this might work when helping patients with mild dementia, “research aimed at... people with moderate-to-severe dementia... is more limited”. (Williamson, 2010, cited by Clare et al., 2022) Despite this, some studies show that patients with dementia respond better to photographs as they “have been associated with higher recognition rates compared to pictograms or clip art”. (Asirot et al., 2022) It’s possible that this is because they trigger memory. With that being said, “the use of pictographs with supplemental text has helped with comprehension and recall” (Asirot et al., 2022), therefore, with more research, communication cards should have an even bigger impact. The solution could be having different types of cards, specific to each type of communication barrier.

To support the previous points, the Communi-Card by Poulin+Morris is a good example of how designers are able to create universal pictograms.



Fig4, (Poulin + Morris, 2017, 'CommuniCard 1 and 2')

If for any reason a patient is unable to verbalise their situation, they simply need to point at the relevant pictogram, and the staff will have a better understanding. This also works in reverse, as staff can do the same when patients don't understand them. It would be particularly helpful to staff in cases of a language barrier as the communication is stunted on both ends. Poulin+Morris were originally commissioned by Hospitals in New York, but the cards are now "used in more than 150 US and Canadian hospitals", (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 88) proving how effective and helpful they are. Richard Poulin commented that "both" cards "were conceived and realised to ease patient, staff and carer anxiety" (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 89) highlighting that when design is made with the audience in mind it is more effective and can help save lives.

Chapter 3: Empathy through Type

Typefaces created with empathy towards disabilities or health conditions can also have an integral impact on saving people's lives. Suffering from a disability, disease or a health condition can often feel isolating, therefore, having a typeface that makes you feel understood can be powerful and can help save a person's life literally, or even simply save a person's quality of life by giving them community and a sense of purpose.



Your favourite*
accessible typeface
[now available]
in narrow!

Fig 5, (PRINT Magazine, 2021, 'FS Me Typeface')

The typeface FS ME was designed “with legibility in mind” (Gordon, 2021) to make reading easier specifically for those with learning disabilities. As it was designed by Jason Smith alongside Mencap, designers can use the typeface knowing it will be accessible and people with learning difficulties can feel more confident reading. Some main characteristics that make this typeface more accessible is that “every character is uniquely identifiable,” “spaces inside” and between characters “are

maximized” (Font Foundry Hub, n.d.) to ensure clarity, and it has “extended ascenders” and “descenders”. (Gordon, 2021) A common issue with typeface readability is “imposter’ letter shapes” (Scope for Business, 2023) as seen with Gill Sans where the “upper case “i”, lower case “l” and the number “1” look the same”. (Scope for Business, 2023) Designed to be legible but not childlike, FS ME avoids patronizing the reader and is made with consideration and compassion. Similarly, the Open Dyslexic font by Abbie Gonzalez is made to help make reading easier for people who suffer from dyslexia. The typeface, however, does not completely solve the problem but helps to fight against “some of the symptoms”. (OpenDyslexic, n.d.) The “letters have heavy weighted bottoms to indicate direction” and help make characters more recognisable.



Fig 6, (OpenDyslexic, n.d., ‘OpenDyslexic’)

The added weight could also help fight against the rotation of letters and “reinforce the line of text”. (OpenDyslexic, n.d.) These typefaces show that graphic designers have the power to create something beautiful with the ability to bring ease to those who struggle. According to Mental Health Foundation in 2018 “For children and young people who have a diagnosis of a learning disability, the prevalence rate of a mental illness is 36% compared to 8% for those without a learning disability.”

(CAMHS, NHS, n.d.) They are also “more likely to experience chronic loneliness (50% compared to around 15 to 30%)” (GOV.UK, 2025) With these statistics in mind, imagine how powerful typefaces like FS ME might be in bringing even a little joy and ease into people’s lives. Feeling understood is a powerful emotion and could potentially save a person’s life.

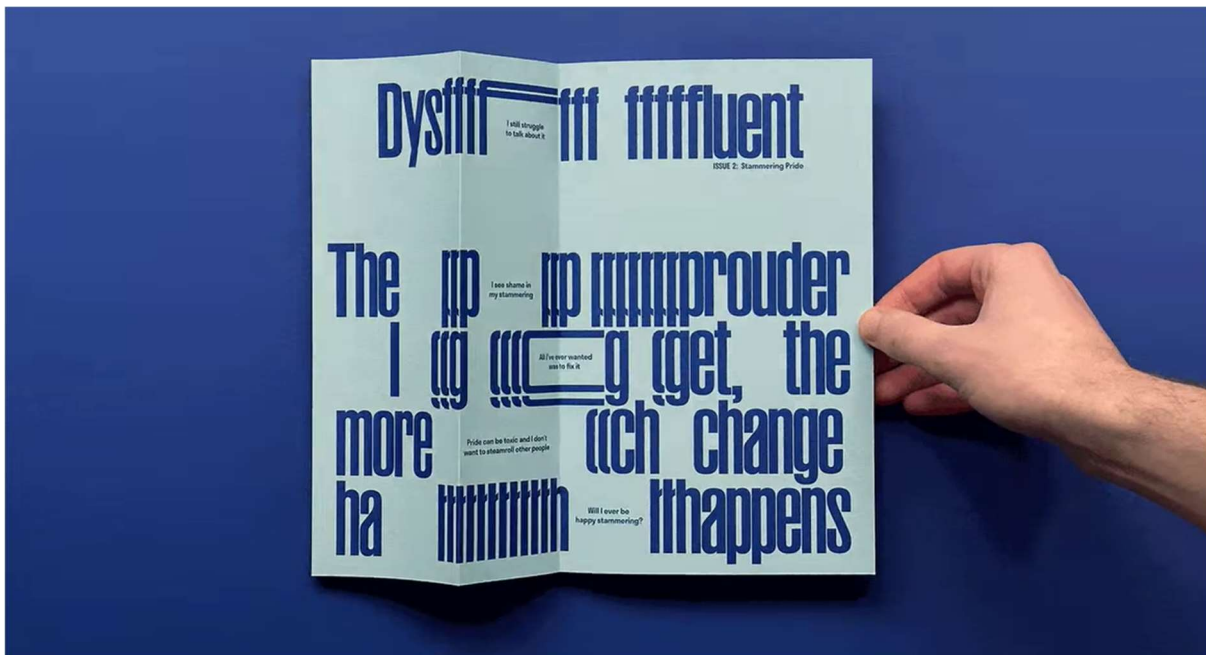


Fig 7, (Dysfluent, 2023, ‘Stammering Pride’)

Whilst visiting the V&A in London I discovered the work of Conor Foran and Bart Rzeznik, Dysfluent Magazine. It is a breathtaking series of design work and research created to influence stammer pride and explore what having a stammer means. The typeface they’ve created is “Dysfluent Mono” (Angelos, 2021) which has a paralysing quality that truly makes you think. Conor Foran himself “has stammered his entire life” and commented “visually representing my stammer by repeated or stretching the letters seemed defiant at the time, almost as if I had given the middle finger to these words and letters that caused me so much grief for so many years”. (Foran, quoted

by Angelos, 2021) This quote highlights how design can be liberating and proves that designers can both liberate themselves through design, and design for those who haven't got the tools to visualise how they feel. Foran wanted to "give stammering a home and identity that would be seen by people who don't stammer" (STAMMA, 2020) and I believe he achieved that. The typeface is difficult to read in the best way, it feels as if your inner voice is stammering, and for a fleeting moment, you are experiencing something that you wouldn't otherwise understand. Stammers are often teased and bullied and a "2019 YouGov poll showed that of 58 people who said they had a stammer, 41 tried to hide it." (STAMMA, 2020) This magazine was made to inspire pride and help people learn about and embrace their stammers which could bring community and joy to people, ultimately saving their lives.



Fig 8, (Studio Dumbar, n.d., 'Alzheimer Nederland')

Finally, Studio Dumbar's redesign for Alzheimer Nederland is striking yet compassionate. It is extremely educating despite its simplicity and takes care of the brand. The old logo had "a dark green tree losing its leaves" reinforcing "negative

perceptions". (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 216) Nevertheless, Studio Dumbar's redesign serves as an antithesis as it "reflects the vanishing world of people with dementia" and handles it with care and humanity, the blur also suggests a sense of "light and hope" (Roberts, Schrauwen, and Wright, 2017, p. 216) and the typeface can be viewed either as vanishing more with time or reforming with time. Studio Dumbar's website states that they sought to "speak to people's hearts in a powerful way, but also quietly, without shouting – with impact and integrity." (Studio Dumbar, n.d.) This is clear with how they've placed the typeface over different angles of people's faces, reminding the audience that there are real people behind the disease and that it isn't just a faceless word. The design serves as a small window into the world of those with dementia and is a strong and beautiful way to attract sympathy for the charity and help raise money and awareness. Not only could this typeface save lives through showing empathy to those suffering, but it could also save lives by positively drawing attention to the charity, allowing them to grow and continue with their work.



Fig 9, (Alzheimer Foundation, n.d., 'Studio Dumbar, Alzheimer Nederland')

Conclusion

This essay has merely highlighted a few examples of the way graphic designers have and will continue to save lives. Not only do designers help create a calmer environment in hospitals with efficient wayfinding, but they also help with doctor productivity and making the environment safer for everyone. In addition to this, they also improve efficiency by making communication easier for those who struggle.

Through helping patients communicate, graphic designers also help them feel more understood. This essay has proven that designers have the power to help literally save lives with their work, but it has also underlined that graphic designers have the ability to save a person's quality of life by showing empathy and gifting people a community and purpose.

Whenever you next visit a hospital, consider the design around you. Imagine how much harder it would be if you were unable to communicate with the staff, and finally, maybe even most importantly, consider designs that have personally impacted your life and made you feel seen.

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