'Bust that noma'

Conceived by
Dr. Rakesh Jalali,
Tata Memorial Hospital,
Parel, Mumbai - 400 012,
India

Reviewed by
Ms Ruchi Narain
Film Maker Director of
award winning Cinema
Kal- Yesterday and
Tomorrow

CHILDREN WITH CANCER

It's hard enough to deal with cancer as an adult. Why does it happen to us? What is it? Will we survive? And most importantly, what can we do?

There are no easy answers. But the answers become even harder when it is a child who is afflicted with this disease. This 11-minute animation film, 'BUST THAT NOMA' sets about trying to answer these questions in an informative, simplistic but positive way.

Anyone who has been in the unfortunate position of having or being close to someone with cancer, will agree that the toughest battle is not that of the actual diagnosis or treatment, but keeping up the spirit of those affected and their loved ones. This is something no medical genius has yet found a cure for. How does one get through each day and moment, knowing full well which way the odds are stacked? And yet some prevail. Some beat it.

On the surface, the script and narration of 'BUST THAT NOMA' aims to familiarize children with a basic understanding of how a cancer works and affects their bodies, the basic medical procedures they need to go through and how the process will affect them. It follows the key plot points of any animation entertainment film for children. The structure is also straightforward so that there is no confusion in the target audience who are already going through one of the most confusing times of their lives.

First we learn that there is villainous a ‘thing’ called NOMA (the cancer) with a regenerative / multiplicative quality which is out to take over the world. It is set to spread over the world. It singles out three ‘hero’ children to attack in different ways, ostensibly the ‘patients’; Bindu, Tingoo and Double U.

Bindu’s bones are ‘eaten’ away by NOMA, Tingoo gets a tumor in the brain and Double U gets Noma proliferating in his blood (Leukemia). As DOCFRIEND whisks them away conspiratorially to Tata Memorial Hospital where they prepare for the fight. The first to be ‘treated’ is Bindu. She is acclimatized to her surroundings and told that the ‘faceless’ men and women in scrubs and masks are friends. This makes one realize how the things we take for granted as adults, must be frightening and mysterious to children. As she loses consciousness at the operating table, she transforms into a Xena-like Superhero who wields her sword and spirit in felling NOMA. When she vanquishes the villainous cancer, she is instructed to wear special shoes and follow-up with exercises. Next up is Tingoo, who undergoes radiotherapy. As his superhero alterego fires missiles at NOMA we understand quite simply why he must stay still and not struggle, else the missile may get him instead! Again, there is an attempt to familiarize the child with what to expect, whether it’s the bright light or the perforated cloth. The last to be treated is Double U who has to undergo chemotherapy. Accompanied by upbeat hip hop-like music, he gears up inside his blood vessels with guns and bazookas to eliminate the many NOMAs. Again, though he eliminates most, he addresses DOCFRIEND asking why he’s feeling so tired. ‘Because your count is down’. No further explanation is given, but an energy packet like a magic potion is given to revive Double U and completely wipe out NOMA. Again, without getting into any detailed explanation the makers seek to familiarize the children with some key jargon they’re likely to hear during the course of their illness as well as key features of the procedures they’ll undergo and by and large, how they’ll feel, all the while hoping to reduce resistance to these things and alarm when it occurs. In this respect it is important that in all three ‘fights’, there’s always a point where it seems they’ve won, only to be counter attacked and almost lose, but finally manage to rise again. As is most often the graph in the illness, it’s best to be prepared for it. And indeed the primary function of the film is to prepare the children in some form what to expect, thereby letting them know they’re not the only ones.
If this were a regular film for entertainment purposes, the formulaic screenplay would’ve demanded that one out of the three children dies (or at least the Dog!). However, always acutely aware of its target audience and purpose of positive reinforcement, in this film, everyone comes out marching triumphantly to the beat over cancer. All stars, being greeted by thousands thronging to see them and Bindu even gets a rose from the handsome boy who made fun of her in the beginning when she fell sick. And the highlight is them all getting ‘badges of honor’ in the form of today’s coolest accessories wrist bands (hospital bands) and a stamp/tattoo on the back of the bald heads, of ‘NO ENTRY for NOMA’!

While the basic script is informative, every other cinematic technique and device from music to the actual drawings, is used unabashedly to subconsciously disseminate a spirit of triumph, even adventure in the course of the illness. Whereas some purist may argue that this is potentially more damaging in the long run to a child as it makes it seem like a video game where one can afford to lose ‘3 lives’ and winning is guaranteed, I would disagree. For even children who are fortunate to have their health intact, need their imaginary world to be in a state of constant action and adventure. Being ill, one is constantly told not to do this or that, thereby killing the very essence of being a child. This film gives children at least that outlet, a clue as to what adventure they can have in their mind while trying to deal with this illness.

The makers pull out all the stops to make sure that the film appeals and entertains its target audience of children. From the loyal dog friend who stammers like Shah Rukh Khan, to the reference of the dog phoning the doctors who treat this superstar to treat the kids, to the Superhero like transformations of each child, complete with superhero skills, costumes, weapons and even the font of the title! Anything to reinforce that the afflicted child is SPECIAL.

This film has already been shown to almost 100 children with cancer (in professionally and medically supervised environments) and met with encouraging response not just in generating positivity, but also having specific benefits like children have understood that they must remain still during radiotherapy, which is usually a practical struggle during conventional practice. In situations where doctors treating children with cancer often have to camouflage their emotions ‘DOCFRIEND’ steps in backed with all the sensitivity, compassion and medical distance of the makers of this film, to guide the child through his difficult journey. The rest is dependant on medical science and the powers that be. This film does an enormous service by trying to take care of the spirit that chases triumph.

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