

Bacteria star in cartoons

By Heather Travis
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Microbiologist Gregor Reid is connecting the dots between art and science through his cartoon video about bacteria in probiotic yogurt.

The Lawson Health Research Institute scientist and professor at The University of Western Ontario is making his second animated feature, following the success of a 14-minute feature film, called, "So, which bacteria did you eat today?".



Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry microbiologist Gregor Reid uses animated bacterial characters, bifidobacterium and lactobacillus, to tell the story of the benefits of probiotics.

About four years ago, Reid created an animated film, with colleague Irene Lenoir-Wijnkoop, a scientist at French yogurt company Danone, showcasing the path of bacteria in probiotic yogurt through the digestive system.

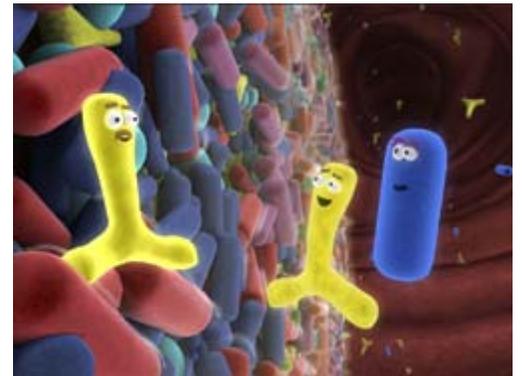
"I've always been interested in how you bring art into science," he says. "I often think it can be more powerful than words."

Reid has been studying probiotics for 26 years, but in 2004 he started working with animator Mark Neysmith of DKP Studios in Toronto to develop yellow and blue 'good guy' cartoon bacterial characters, bifidobacterium and lactobacillus, to tell the story of the how "good bacteria" can help kill "bad bugs."

"It's a relatively new field," says Reid. "Until Activia was launched in Canada, most people didn't know what a probiotic was."

When it comes to public education about probiotics, Reid says "it's a huge gap right now. People don't understand what they are doing and why they are doing it."

In the past, Neysmith helped Reid make a similar-type short animated film, which he used to introduce his research at lectures. Danone viewed that earlier work and contacted Reid because the company was interested in making an informative video about the benefits of probiotic yogurt, such as its product Activia, in a non-commercial format.



This film meshes together live images with cartoon animation and diagrams. From the minute the mouth closes over the yogurt-covered spoon to the time the bacterial characters 'exit' the scene, Reid provides a comprehensive explanation of how bacteria can be a preventative measure against illness and infection.

The film, which took about a year to produce, was funded by Danone.

"How do you tell that story in words," he asked, adding some people are better taught using pictures.

Reid said the information in the cartoon is scientifically accurate; however the film uses pop culture images and recognizable music, such as the James Bond theme song, to be more appealing.

Since its 2005 launch at a nutrition conference in South Africa, the movie has been translated into 13 languages including English, French, Brazilian, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Turkish and Zulu and is a teaching aid and community resource.

Reid won't be hanging up his lab coat to start working for Walt Disney just yet, however he says he will always find ways to integrate art into science. He believes animation is an innovative way of presenting research and scientific information.

The new animated film is about the origin of bacteria.

“We need to bring more of the arts back into the pure sciences and medicines,” he says. “I want to make an impact globally, not just locally. This is just one tool.”

Those interested in watching the film can view it at www.activia.ca/probiotic.