**A Hollywood House Call**

By Andrew Holtz, MPH

Here’s where stories are born, in a delivery room with eight charcoal Herman Miller chairs around a worn table. The whiteboards that line two walls are filled with a medical history...of a sort. The notes outline key plot points in episodes of the TV show ER.

On this day, the ER writers, who spin entertaining medical fictions, have visitors from the real world of health and medicine, including a big gun from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Mitchell L. Cohen, MD, Director of the CDC’s Coordinating Center for Infectious Diseases, takes one of the chairs, across from two of his CDC colleagues. Also with them is Vicki Beck, MS, Director of the Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) program at USC Annenberg’s Norman Lear Center.

Before the meeting begins, the quartet gobble quick bites from their sandwiches. There hasn’t been time for a proper lunch as they zip around Los Angeles from one studio to the next...briefing writers and producers on health topics that could be entertaining...and carry a message.

Writers enter stage left.

Joe Sachs and Karen Maser take chairs at one end of the table, followed by Virgil Williams, who sits at the opposite end, between the CDC visitors. The ER writers are veterans of these briefings and have a long-standing relationship with the HH&S program. Not only that, but Joe Cohen is also a physician, one of two MDs on the ER writing staff.

Dr. Cohen starts with the big picture, really big: an overview of the last 100 years of battling infectious diseases, from the days when childhood deaths in the US were common, through the post-WWII era when it appeared that antibiotics and other tools had won the war, to the re-emergence of old killers and the deadly bloom of new threats like HIV.

**Also an Opportunity to Get Feedback from Specialists**

Vicki Beck says that while these briefings offer TV writers a primer in key health topics, a physician-writer with Dr. Sachs’ experience and expertise may use the meetings more as an opportunity to get feedback from specialists about ideas he’s already mulling over.

“We don’t really push as much as we inform and educate. And then we try to explore what other topics the writers are interested in. So we go in with a pretty broad mandate. We use the topic and the experts as our calling card,” she says. “But then we open it up for a larger conversation.”

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By Rabija S. Tuma, PhD

BOSTON—A new assay under development detected pancreatic cancer with 87% sensitivity and 98% specificity, according to research presented here at the American Association for Cancer Research's Fifth Annual International Conference on Frontiers in Cancer Prevention Research.

The blinded, independent validation test of the assay was conducted in 114 patients and 100 controls, said Anna Lokshin, PhD, Associate Professor of Medicine and Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, during the presentation.

Dr. Lokshin and colleagues are using a new antibody-based detection system to develop a panel of serum biomarkers that can detect prostate cancer early. The current assay uses 10 biomarkers.

“Pancreatic cancer is particularly challenging. There are no high-risk factors that allocate risk to a subset of people that would make screening more efficient.”

Diagnostic tests that are currently available are invasive and lead to pancreatitis in a significant fraction of patients, making them inappropriate for screening.

The payoffs from briefings like this may be slow in coming, but ideas tossed out on tables in writers’ rooms do find their way into stories that reach millions of TV viewers. For example, genetic testing for breast cancer risk and prophylactic surgery were among the topics that NCI colleagues brought to a round of Hollywood briefings in February 2005. That fall, both “Grey’s Anatomy” and “ER” had stories about the difficult choices BRCA testing presents. And one year later, expert judges honored both shows with Sentinel for Health Awards.

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This is a vaccine that is recommended for adolescents. That’s a population that often doesn’t get to the physician,” Dr. Cohen points out. “So having a storyline that talks about that kind of vaccine can be very valuable from a public health perspective.”

But ER and other shows are not public health media campaigns, and their scripts are finalized in studio offices, not at the CDC or NIH. In this case, could a fictional debate over whether vaccination encourages sexual activity stir up new opposition? Dr. Cohen says that so far it seems aftermath of shows that were developed without any expert input.

Vicki Beck seconds that viewpoint, noting that the role of the HHS program is not just to teach Hollywood about health, but also to teach health experts about Hollywood.

“Absolutely,” she says. “We understand what writers want, because we are talking to writers all the time and they are asking us questions. So we try to educate people within the public health community about the demands on writers, first of all; then the kinds of things they are interested in and the kinds of things they are not interested in. A lot of times public health people will want to talk about a campaign and how it was developed. Well, writers don’t care about that.”


“What do you lose sleep over?”

Dr. Cohen replies that he is fearful of the threat of intentional outbreaks using natural pathogens or genetically modified products of bioweapons programs. Dire scenarios, indeed; and Dr. Cohen consulted with writers for the TV show 24 to shape just this sort of story last year.

Although there was plenty of fiction in the episodes, Dr. Cohen says the shows displayed some of the steps that public health authorities might actually take when confronted by a suspected biological terror attack.

Human Stories that Underlie Important Health Issues

Beck says they look for the human stories that underlie important health issues. For instance, rather than talking about the importance of health literacy, she would tell writers about a mother of a child with an earache who put liquid antibiotic into the child’s ear, because she didn’t understand that the medicine was meant to be swallowed. Or a patient who was given a prescription to take a pill three times a day, but instead risked an overdose or treatment failure by downsing three pills once a day.

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In October and November of that year, viewers of both “Grey’s Anatomy” and “ER” were introduced to women, their spouses and other family members, and friends who all struggled with the difficult choices BRCA testing presents. In the fall of 2006, expert judges honored both shows with Sentinel for Health Awards.

Next time: The Hollywood Feedback Loop: Topics brought by health experts to Hollywood echo back to policymakers.