No Poster Children Here: The 2007 Sentinel for Health Awards

By Andrew Holtz, MPH

They aren’t the stereotypical courageous patients so often trotted out in media portrayals of people facing cancer treatment. A nonsmoker dealing with adenocarcinoma and a new mother who delayed examination of a breast lump are two portraits of cancer patients that won kudos this year from a group that advises television scriptwriters on health and medical issues.

Award for General Hospital

The character of Alexis Davis, on ABC’s General Hospital daytime drama, is in remission following treatment for Stage II adenocarcinoma. She’s a nonsmoker in her mid-40s. The judges of the Sentinel for Health Award noted that the storyline, which has been going on for more than a year, “addresses a common myth about lung cancer—that only smokers get it—and accurately depicts the struggles during treatment from surgery and chemotherapy.”

In one scene, Alexis (played by Nancy Lee Grahn) is alone in a room, looking in a mirror at what’s left of her hair, thinned by treatment. She reaches into a box, takes out a wig, and tries it on. The reflected image makes her laugh. She pulls off the wig. Then her laughter crumbles into tears and she screams, “Oh, god, this sucks! This sucks! It just sucks! God!” Sobbing, she pushes the mirror down.

General Hospital head writer Robert Guza says the wig scene turned out extremely well, capturing the range of emotions that whipsaw people who have cancer, and avoiding a sugar-coated portrayal of battling disease.

“We really made a commitment to do it honestly. We’ve all had various experiences with cancer; and it’s not like these people are striding forward to thwart the disease. It’s scary. It’s terrifying. It’s humiliating. Some of it is funny,” he said.

Award for Grey’s Anatomy

There was also not a whit of heroic idealism in the portrayal of a young mother with breast cancer on Grey’s Anatomy, also on ABC. Guilt was the theme of the episode that won the award for best Primetime Minor Storyline.

“There’s the guilt of just putting everything into yourself and having to really be selfish for that moment; taking care of yourself and maybe putting off part of the family,” says writer Zoanne Clack, MD.

The character feels guilty also for, at least in part, blaming her baby for causing a delay in diagnosis; the changes in her breast were assumed to just be part of her pregnancy. Something similar happened to a friend of Dr. Clack’s: what turned out to be a tumor was first thought to be just the development of a milk duct. She says she hopes the episode alerts women that breast tumors do sometimes appear during pregnancy, when the many changes in a woman’s body may mask an abnormal growth.

‘What Public Health Messages?’

While telling stories that capture viewers is the first priority of all TV writers, Dr. Clack says that when interviewing medical experts as part of their story research, she and her colleagues always keep in mind the reach of their dramas.

“We'll always say, before the end of the call, ‘What public health messages would you like 25 million people
**ScriptDoctor**

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A Sentinel for Health Award is affirmation that they’ve used their broadcast pulpit well.

“Tobacco” is the kind of thing that is frequent reality. Gusa says they haven’t decided just how the whole story will play out, but he knows something about the real life odds facing people who’ve been through lung cancer treatment.

“I would say the chances are very good that she will recur in the future,” he predicts.

A recurrence would present new opportunities for emotionally gripping storytelling—and it would match the frequent reality.

“This is the kind of thing that is ongoing in many cases. I think we’d like to honor that.”

Jennifer Pietenpol, PhD, Professor of Biochemistry and Ingram Professor of Cancer Research at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, has been named Director of Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center after serving as Interim Director since February 2007. She joined Vanderbilt in 1994 and in 2002 became the Cancer Center’s Associate Director for Basic Sciences.

Richard Gralla, MD, has been appointed Chief of Hematology/Oncology and Vice President of Cancer Services at North Shore University Hospital and Long Island Jewish Medical Center in Lake Success, NY. He was previously Chief of Thoracic Oncology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Director of the Ochsner Cancer Institute, and Associate Director of the Columbia University Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Richard Jove, PhD, has been named Director of the City of Hope Beckman Research Institute. In his new appointment, Dr. Jove, who is also Deputy Director of the City of Hope Comprehensive Cancer Center, will lead the research institute’s efforts to bring together basic scientists and physicians in order to accelerate the development of new therapies for cancer, diabetes, and other life-threatening diseases. He succeeds Arthur Riggi, PhD, now Director Emeritus and Professor of Biology at the Beckman Research Institute.

Also at City of Hope, David A. Horne, PhD, is the new Chair of the Division of Molecular Medicine. Dr. Horne, an internationally recognized leader in the field of natural products synthesis, especially in the areas of biologically active marine alkaloids and medicinal chemistry, joined City of Hope in 2006 as Professor in Molecular Medicine and Co-director of the Synthetic and Biopolymer Chemistry Core Program, a position he will retain.

Gina Szymanski, MS, RN, Nurse Manager at the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center, has received the Linda Arrentz Excellence in Cancer Nursing Management Award from the Oncology Nursing Society. Named for the first Director of Nursing at the Cancer Center, who died of the disease in 1982, the award recognizes outstanding individuals in cancer nursing administration.

Anthony Ingenito, MD, an oncologist and researcher at the Cancer Center at Hackensack (NJ) University Medical Center, has been named founding Chairman of the newly established Department of Radiation Oncology. Dr. Ingenito was formerly Medical Director of the Division of Radiation Oncology, which was recently upgraded to departmental status to reflect the complexity and comprehensiveness of the services offered, including an increasing number of clinical trials.

Kristen S. Coller, MD, has joined the Pain and Palliative Medicine Program at Ohio State University Medical Center. Dr. Coller recently completed her fellowship with Kansas City Hospice and Palliative Care at the University of Kansas Medical Center and is certified in both internal medicine and hospice and palliative care. In addition to her work at the medical center, Dr. Coller will also work with the staff and patients in the James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute.