by Andrew Holtz, MPH

As the sun set over Hollywood on a late September evening, the stretch limos pulled up and disgorged their celebrity cargo to the waiting throngs on the red carpet. Well, actually I didn’t see any limos outside the 2006 Sentinel for Health Awards ceremony. There was no red carpet. And an actor from a daytime drama was probably the only one who would have been recognized by onlookers outside the group of TV writers and producers enjoying a buffet dinner at the Writers Guild of America, west headquarters.

The Sentinel for Health Awards were created by the CDC six years ago, and were then joined by the NCI and other agencies in sponsoring the awards and a program intended to help screenwriters get things right when it comes to health topics.

After dinner, it was standing room only in the meeting room for the main event, introduced by Martin Kaplan, PhD, Associate Dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Director of the Norman Lear Center at the school.

“The goal is to praise and honor those storytellers who are aware, not only of their power, but of their responsibilities, and who use it in order to improve the lives of people—in this case particularly in the realm of health,” Dr. Kaplan said later.

The Sentinel for Health Awards may not grab the popular attention of the Emmys or the Oscars, but they have the distinction of ranking the potential health benefit to the audience above entertainment value when it comes to judging television dramas and comedies.

The awards were created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention six years ago to recognize daytime dramas (“soaps” to most of us) that presented accurate and useful health information. The CDC has been joined by the National Cancer Institute and other agencies in sponsoring the awards and a program intended to help screenwriters get things right when it comes to health topics.

The writers embarked on the cancer storyline for dramatic reasons.

“The way stories emerge on soap operas is that you have a character who seems ready for a particular ‘passage,’” says Jean Passanante, head writer for As the World Turns.

The writers then contacted medical experts, including those connected with the NCI, for advice, in part because many of them had personal experience with someone who had been through cancer.

“We wanted to approximate something like what a woman’s real experience could be, and so we’re very happy that that was rewarded,” Passanante says.

The series followed the character of Lucinda as she discovered a lump, had a surgical biopsy and then lumpectomy and chemotherapy. In a clip shown at the award ceremony, Lucinda didn’t like the adverse effects of the treatment, so she decided to try something from a foreign clinic, despite warnings from a friend.

“Lucinda, there’s a reason some of these alternative treatments are not allowed here in the States,” the friend said.

“Yes, outdated rules, corrupt lawyers!” Lucinda shot back.

“No, a patient’s safety.”

After a bad experience with the alternative treatment, Lucinda returns to her oncologist. The cancer appears to be spreading, so they opt for additional chemotherapy and a mastectomy. This course of treatment appears to be successful.

“It means a lot to me personally,” Passanante says of their first place award. “The fact that we were recognized by the Sentinel for Health Award for doing it accurately and responsibly was very rewarding.”

Let’s be honest, a Sentinel for Health Award doesn’t arouse the clammor of major industry awards. Nevertheless, TV writers are jazzed about being recognized for telling health-related stories that are both accurate and entertaining.

“Absolutely, I think they are extremely proud of it. Their shows and their networks are proud of it. They

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mention anything about prophylactic surgery?” the ER doctor asked.
“You mean, having my breasts removed?” the woman responded. “
And an oophorectomy.”
“I’d never do that. I want to fall in love. I want to have a child, a family;
while there’s still time.”
“Well, then you might want to consider just the mastectomies and wait for
the ovaries…”
“Just the mastectomies! What man would want to look at me then?”
“There have been a lot of advances in reconstructive surgery, and you need
to protect yourself.”
“Can you promise me that giving up my breasts would protect me?”
“It would decrease your chance of getting cancer by 90 percent,” the doc-
tor stated.
Ultimately, the woman decides to have surgery, but then has to deal with
some difficult after-effects. The story was no “happily-ever-after” tale. It
faced head-on the anguish of making irrevocable decisions based on proba-
bilities, not certainties.
Dr. Zwerling says one reason the ER writers value the Sentinel for Health
Award is that the judges understand the potential health implications of the
stories they spin for their viewers.
“So an award from them is very validating. Our show is, first and fore-
most, entertainment; but getting an award from them really validates that
other piece, which is our ability to send out a public health message, educate
the public about health issues, and accurately portray health dilemmas. So
it means a great deal to us actually.”
In my next column—exploring why the writers of TV fiction writers
care about accuracy.

**ScriptDoctor**

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boast about it in their promotional materials,” Martin Kaplan says.
“And it’s a way of giving these writers and producers something that
they can use; so if someone says to them, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter if it’s accu-
rate or not, let’s cut this corner, that’s dramatic license;’ it gives them a basis
for deciding when that might be true and when that might not be true.”

**Award for ER**

ER writer Lisa Zwerling, MD, says that on the night of the award ceremony, for
her the cliché was true: she was just happy that her show was nominated in
the Primetime Minor Storyline category for two episodes in which a character
had to deal with the implications of a breast cancer gene test results. As it
turned out, ER came away with more that just a nomination.
“I was surprised we won!” Dr. Zwerling says. “Honestly. Because of
the fact that we are an older show and have been doing this for a long time
and that we have won a lot of Sentinel for Health Awards. I was thinking
probably Grey’s Anatomy or some show like that would win. So I was delighted
and quite surprised when they read our name, and really happy.”
“I brought the award to work the next day. The first thing up that morn-
ing was the producers meeting and I put the award in the middle of the table
and said, ‘We’re still doing our thing!’ Everybody was really excited about it.”
ER has a bursting awards case outside the writers’ room, but Dr.
Zwerling says they made room to fea-
ture their newest honor.
As she expected, Grey’s Anatomy
did well that night, too, taking home
both second and third place awards for
major storylines, including one about
breast cancer gene testing and prophy-
lactic surgery.
In the award-winning ER storyline,
a patient tells her doctor that she got a
BRCA gene test after her mother died
of cancer. Although she learned she
had a high-risk form of the gene, she
resisted prophylactic surgery.
“Did the oncologist you spoke with

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