



**SCRIPTDOCTOR: MEDICINE IN THE MEDIA**

## Educational TV: Lessons from Primetime Storytelling

By Andrew Holtz, MPH

**I**'ve seen the ads and I choose not to watch it."

That was the first remark one oncologist made when I called to ask some questions about the medicine depicted on the hit TV show *House*.

"I find it pretty amusing," was the comment from a hospitalist who said he watches the show because his 14-year-old daughter is a fan.

I encountered the full range of reactions—from disdain to ignorance to pure viewing pleasure—from the physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals I interviewed while writing a book about *House* (an excerpt of which was published in *OT's* 10/25/06 issue). This TV drama is hardly unique. Whether it is *Grey's Anatomy* or *ER* or *Scrubs* or another show...whenever scalpels are drawn to be used as dramatic or comedic devices, you can almost hear the sighs rising from those who practice medicine in the real world. "That's not how it really is," some complain. "Why do they do it that way?" others ask.

Certainly, many doctors and nurses enjoy TV shows with medical themes and forgive the writers' transgressions against protocols and science. Still, it may be harder for health care professionals to suspend disbelief in order to enjoy the storytelling. Professionals are separated from average viewers by their direct experience with health care and their devotion to the craft of medicine.

But of course, television writers and producers are not aiming to please medical professionals; ultimately they serve the vast general public—and therein lie lessons.



*This new column written by Andrew Holtz, MPH, a former CNN Medical Correspondent and the author of the new book "The Medical Science of House, M.D.," will plumb mass media programs, particularly entertainment TV, for insight into popular perceptions, so that rather than merely wincing at distortions or oversimplifications in the portrayals of medicine on these shows, health care professionals can learn something from media professionals about the way that medical and health topics are presented.*

*Andrew Holtz welcomes questions about how the media treat medical topics or suggestions for future columns about a particular show or topic to discuss—e-mail him at [OT@lwwny.com](mailto:OT@lwwny.com)*

If there is anything that producers and writers know, especially those who create successful shows, it is how their audiences think. Not just what viewers consciously understand or their factual knowledge of health care or biology, but something deeper and more important: their beliefs, their assumptions, their attitudes about the medical arts.

This gut connection to the psyches of viewers is just as vital to a screenwriter as an intimate familiarity with anatomy is to a surgeon or physician.

While the liberties with medical reality taken by screenwriters may be vexing at times, those who dwell in the world of medicine could learn a few things about what patients think and believe by looking at what viewers accept in their TV shows. And studies about communication breakdowns between professionals and patients certainly indicate the need for better rapport.

As one article delicately phrased the problem, "A wide variety of empirical studies document that physician-patient communication is suboptimal"

over one year for a 15-week writing workshop, *re: Writing Project*, for post-treatment young adults in their 20s, 30s, and early 40s in New York City.

"The *re: Writing Project* was something I came up with as just part of The LifeLab, our first program. I figured for people to be able to better process their cancer experience it would be helpful for them to engage in some kind of creative writing, and that has been proven to be true," said Jodi Sax, an attorney who is the founder and Executive Director of The LifeLab, who is also an entertainment and intellectual property attorney and a colon cancer survivor.

The support group combines counseling, writing instruction, and mentoring to support participants' endeavors

(*Back AL, Arnold RM, et al. Approaching Difficult Communication Tasks in Oncology. CA Cancer J Clin 2005; 55:164-177.*)

### 'Suboptimal Communication' = Poor Ratings

To a screenwriter or TV show producer, there's another term for 'suboptimal communication' with viewers: it's called poor ratings. The consequence is cancellation. So successful writers hone their sense of what viewers think and feel. They know when and how to explain key concepts...how much detail to use...what words will convey the essence of what the viewer needs to understand in order to follow the story.

Some of these popular beliefs come as no surprise, while others can reveal important nuances in how lay people look at medicine, health care, and public policy.

A consistent theme of the *House* series and many other shows is that more medicine is better medicine. The urge to 'do something' is strong, even when the scientific evidence comparing

intervention to caution is equivocal.

Of course, drama depends on action, so there is an added bias against watchful waiting. Nevertheless, popular shows tend to highlight the benefits of pills and procedures, while frequently underplaying the risks and costs. This persistent theme in the media, which pervades much news coverage as well as entertainment, helps reinforce the desires of patients who believe that someone, somewhere will be able to rescue them from their ills, if only they tried harder.

But watching primetime TV can also reveal clues, for instance, that mandatory registration of human clinical trials has broad support outside of medical circles. In 2004, an episode of *Law & Order* (the classic series) featured a story line that TV.com described this way: "McCoy goes after the C.E.O. of a pharmaceutical company who knowingly commissioned further clinical trials on a drug to extend its patent protection yielding millions of dollars of profit without disclosing that previous clinical studies had demonstrated that the drug created a high risk of suicide in its users."

*"By pointing out that popular entertainment can offer useful lessons about the beliefs and attitudes of patients and policymakers, I am not arguing that all shows do a good job handling the medical and health aspects of their stories. Many, many shows are truly awful. Yet some manage to balance compelling storytelling with reasonable fidelity to medical facts."*

Sam Waterston, playing Asst. District Attorney Jack McCoy, displayed his characteristic righteous indignation and bewilderment when he learned that a pharmaceutical company could withhold unfavorable trial results.

### LAF Grants

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cific education, including treatment information, tips for managing side effects, questions to ask physicians, and information on clinical trials, in addition to a psychosocial support component, which will allow participants to connect with others who might be going through similar experiences.

### Writing Workshop for Young Adult Cancer Survivors

The New York LifeLab, an organization dedicated to helping young adult cancer survivors rebuild their lives after treatment, received a grant of \$25,000

during and after the workshop, and allows participants to process their cancer experience through written expression.

The LifeLab also has an intermediate writing group, *re: Writing Project II*, which is open to young adult cancer survivors who have writing experience or have taken the beginner's course, Ms. Sax noted.

Last year, a pilot cycle of the beginner's writing workshop began, as a collaboration between The LifeLab, CancerCare, and Teachers & Writers Collaborative. The first edition of The LifeLab's literary journal, *Noble*, includes the work of the eight young adults who participated in the pilot cycle. The next workshop is scheduled for this winter. □

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The way the story progressed made clear that the writers (and by extension their viewers) believed that only an evildoer would be opposed to disclosure of deaths and serious harm suffered by trial participants. Federal law has not yet caught up with ADA McCoy’s sense of what should be legal when it comes to human experimentation, but the

sense one gets from viewing this show is that the public is on board.

This example makes another point. The messages contained in popular TV shows offer insight not only to the minds of patients, but also to the thinking of politicians and other policymakers. A legislator may ignore the pleadings in a medical journal editorial with impunity; but opposing the sense of a show beloved by millions and millions of voters is not something politicians do lightly.

Although mandatory trial registration is not yet law, after watching that episode of *Law & Order* I wouldn’t bet against the eventual passage of such a requirement.

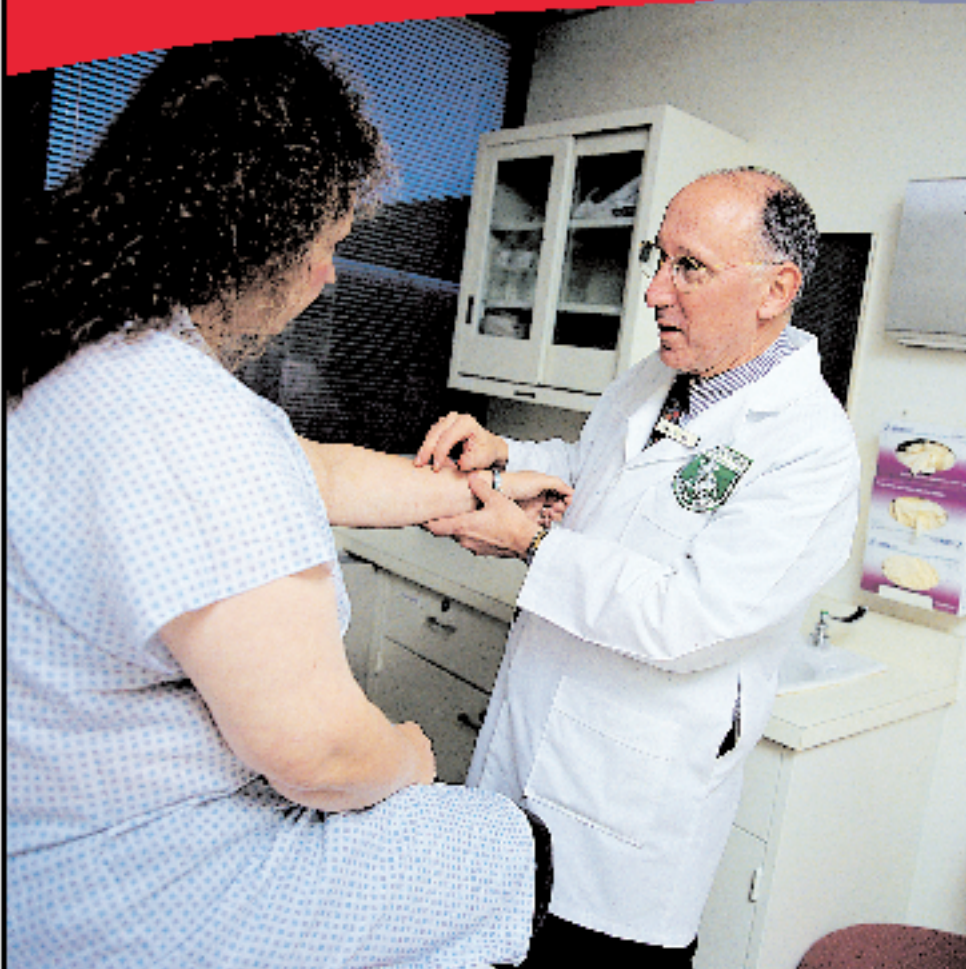
By pointing out that popular entertainment can offer useful lessons about the beliefs and attitudes of patients and policymakers, I am not arguing that all shows do a good job handling the medical and health aspects of their stories. Many, many shows are truly awful. Yet some manage to balance compelling storytelling with reasonable fidelity to medical facts.

Each year some of these shows are honored at a gala Hollywood award ceremony. Well, maybe not so gala, but the trophies are handsome and this year’s ceremony was held just across from CBS Television City in Los Angeles. In my next column: a look at who won and why. 

## Coming in Future Issues

- Use of Proton Therapy Expands
- Air Flow Obstruction May Predict Lung Lesions
- Advanced Colorectal Cancer: Group Recommends Heated Chemotherapy after Surgery, but Controversy Remains
- Study: One-Third of Breast Cancer Patients Unhappy with Cosmetic Outcome of Breast-Conserving Surgery
- Prophylactic Oophorectomy May Increase Mortality in Some Patients at Average Risk of Ovarian Cancer
- Targeted Therapies in Renal Cell Carcinoma: Sorting Out the Many Questions, Few Answers
- Mesothelioma: Limited Radiation to the Contralateral Lung Can Reduce Fatal Pulmonary Events
- Platinum-based Regimens Lead Adjuvant Therapy for Lung Cancer
- Myeloma: Value of Stem Cell Transplant Debated
- Tumors of Unknown Origin: In Study, Microarray Assay and Tumor Library Found to Identify Primary Site Most of the Time
- Scientific Panel: Immunotherapy on Threshold of Joining Surgery, Chemotherapy, and RT as 4th Treatment Modality
- Relapsed/Refractory CLL: Oblimersen + Chemotherapy Improves Outcome
- Aerobic Exercise Maintains Hematocrit during Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer
- 17-AAG Targeted Antibiotic + Trastuzumab Shows Promise for Metastatic Breast Cancer
- Radiofrequency Ablation Promising for Inoperable Lung Cancer
- Intensity-Modulated Radiation Therapy Found to Help Avoid Breast Burns

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