


**SCRIPT DOCTOR: MEDICINE IN THE MEDIA**

## "And the Winners Are...!"

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.*

The Sentinel for Health Awards may not grab the popular attention of the Emmys or the Oscars, but it does 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

### More Information about the Awards Online

More information about the 2006 Sentinel for Health Awards is available at <http://learcenter.org/html/projects/?cm=hhs/sentinel>



*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)*

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.

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.

"Our 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.

### Cancer Topics Well Represented

In 2004 the Sentinel for Health Awards created categories for primetime dramas and comedies and then last year Spanish-language telenovelas were added. Cancer topics were well represented among this year's finalists and a breast cancer storyline from *As the World Turns* took first place honors in the daytime drama category.

Mike Miller, who helps manage the participation of the National Cancer Institute, pointed out that the storyline of "Lucinda's Breast Cancer" was much more than just a one-shot mention.

"They did a multi-month storyline where a lead character was diagnosed with breast cancer and was considering various treatment options, including clinical trials and even a clinic in Mexico that wasn't licensed," Miller said.

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.

"Yeah, 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 clamor 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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## 2006 Sentinel for Health Awards

### DAYTIME DRAMA

- 1st Place: "Lucinda's Breast Cancer," *As the World Turns* (CBS); Topic: Breast cancer
- 2nd Place: "Surviving and Learning to Live as an Amputee," *Days of Our Lives* (NBC); Topic: Veterans' health
- 3rd Place: "Billy Takes a Drink," *Guiding Light* (CBS); Topic: Alcohol abuse

### SPANISH-LANGUAGE TELENOVELA

- 1st Place: "Don Pedro's Diabetes," *Amarte Así* (Telemundo); Topic: Diabetes

### PRIMETIME COMEDY

- 1st Place: "The Kidney Stays in the Picture," *George Lopez* (ABC); Topic: Kidney disease
- 2nd Place: "George Helps Ernie See the Cellu-Light," *George Lopez* (ABC); Topic: Obesity

- 3rd Place: "My Chopped Liver," *Scrubs* (NBC); Topic: Organ donation

### PRIMETIME MINOR STORYLINE

- 1st Place: "BRCA—Breast Cancer Risks," *ER* (NBC); Topic: Breast and ovarian cancer
- 2nd Place: "So...What Brings You to Armageddon?" *Huff* (Showtime); Topic: Drug abuse

### PRIMETIME DRAMA

- 1st Place: "Harvest," *Numb3rs* (CBS); Topic: Organ transplantation
- 2nd Place: "Waiting for a Heart Transplant," *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC); Topic: Organ transplantation
- 3rd Place: "Let It Be," *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC); Topic: Breast and ovarian cancer
- Finalist: "Expectations," *Without A Trace* (CBS); Topic: HIV and pregnancy

## 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 that if someone says to them, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter if it’s accurate 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 than 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 morning 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 feature 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 prophylactic 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

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 doctor 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 probabilities, 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 foremost, 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.



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