

## From script to stethoscope: can medical television dramas educate?

Du scénario au stéthoscope : les drames médicaux télévisés peuvent-ils éduquer ?

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He is a brilliant diagnostician, solving cases no other physician can. He is strong-willed, navigating the bureaucracies of healthcare head-on. He is honorable to his patients – “Death Before Dishonor” tattooed in bold on his back. Aspiring doctors and TV connoisseurs alike will be quick to recognize this character sketch as Dr. Conrad Hawkins, the main character of the popular medical drama, *The Resident*.

Although audiovisual materials, such as films, are often used in medical education, medical dramas are unique because they present the archetypes of excellent physicians in specific fictional characters, over multiple occurrences. Dr. Hawkins, like many fictional TV doctors, embodies the quintessential seasoned physician: technical proficiency, empathetic bedside manners, dependability and a strong moral code wound into a complex yet likable character. Thus, medical students who watch medical dramas may aim to personify the traits of these fictional physicians that resonate with them. Could medical dramas serve as a supplementary medium for shaping medical education?

In a study conducted by Jerrentrup et al.<sup>1</sup> spanning eight years, educators used *House*, *MD* to teach students about rare diseases and diagnostic strategies. A detailed Likert-style questionnaire was administered to 213 students to assess their learning experience. Compared to traditional instruction, students reported improved learning (69.9%), better concentration (89.7%), higher motivation to

participate (88.7%), and a more enjoyable learning experience (86.7%). Moreover, the students strongly disagreed with Dr. House's maverick approach to dealing with his colleagues and patients. In a similar study conducted by Osborne et al.,<sup>2</sup> clips were utilized from the UK television series *24 Hours in A&E* to develop an educational program aimed at enhancing care-based learning among medical students. Medical learning experiences were assessed by analyzing responses to research questions concerning emotional experience, learning needs and academic suitability. In response to this medical reality television series, feelings of excitement, amusement, concern, nervousness, sadness and joy were expressed. Students were able to identify gaps in their clinical knowledge, such as in interpreting patient results, the practical and ethical aspects of prescribing and in end-of-life care. Overall, these studies show that there was a noticeable increase in student engagement and greater emphasis on holistic patient care and reflective, emotionally engaged learning.

Conversely, there is a persisting criticism that TV dramas inaccurately portray medical content.<sup>3</sup> Many dramas condense complex cases into a single episode, presenting oversimplified solutions and miracle cures that fail to reflect the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in real medical practice. For the sake of storytelling, procedural outcomes in TV dramas are often heavily exaggerated in favor of survival, as in the case of cardiopulmonary

resuscitation.<sup>4</sup> Such inaccurate portrayals contribute to misinformation and negatively influence decisions made during care, which may have serious implications for patient well-being. Medical dramas also often inaccurately portray one physician fulfilling the roles of many physicians while navigating a myriad of personal romances and rivalries that can be considered unethical in the workplace.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it becomes clear that entertainment value is prioritized over medical accuracy in most medical dramas, which can present a significant barrier to educational application.

Nevertheless, one study observed that many junior physicians identified with certain aspects of fictional doctors' practices.<sup>3</sup> Through the process of watching and thinking about these characters, one may learn and adopt behaviors vicariously through social learning. A key concept in social learning theory is reciprocal determinism, suggesting that an individual's behavior influences their environment, while the environment, in turn, shapes the individual. In this context, the "environment" encompasses both real and vicarious clinical experiences, prompting students to reflect on how they might act in comparable situations. It is worth considering how the combination of unique real-life experiences and ideas obtained from compelling medical dramas contribute to opinions in patient care, especially in pre-medical and current medical students.

Overall, medical dramas hold promise as supplementary educational tools to enhance traditional teaching methods. Nonetheless, medical educators must emphasize critical analysis skills, guiding students to discern authentic educational value from dramatic embellishments. As such, future studies should aim to clarify the ways in which medical dramas shape learning and decision-making among pre-medical students, which can help ground learning from medical dramas in realism. Finally, research should examine how televised educational strategies can complement instruction, fostering a comprehensive and interactive learning experience for medical students.

Ultimately, medical television dramas may hold promise for enriching traditional medical education by offering dynamic, emotionally resonant portrayals of medical practice. When combined thoughtfully with rigorous instructional methods and critical analytical frameworks, these dramas can contribute to building reflective and patient-centered healthcare professionals.

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