

» HEALTH MATTERS

Hollywood turns to Lear Center for health advice

Television is not only a powerful entertainment medium, but it also plays a critical role in teaching the public about health. For example, a 2005 Porter Novelli survey found that over one-third of daytime drama viewers took action on a health issue after hearing about it on TV. Millions watch storylines acted out on topics such as sexually transmitted diseases on "Private Practice," cancer on "Desperate Housewives," or construction safety on "Pecados Ajenos," a Spanish-language telenovela. Knowing that TV dramas and comedies can be an important conduit by which to educate and motivate people, public health professionals work behind the scenes to help provide accurate health information to writers and producers.



L.J. ANDERSON

Sandra de Castro Buffington is director of Hollywood, Health & Society (www.usc.edu/hhs) at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center in Beverly Hills. The center partners with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Cancer Institute to offer accurate health information to the entertainment industry, improve public health and evaluate the impact of health messages. De Castro Buffington is a Brazilian-American with 30 years of experience in the global health field.

& Society provide to TV writers and producers?

A: Writers and producers come to us for health information on any topic. We get calls seven days a week, and I have staff running around with Blackberrys so they can respond to very short deadlines. When we have inquiries, we set up phone consultations. We are funded by the CDC, and they make all of their experts available to us. We have subject matter experts who we can access nationally, internationally, and many locally who are affiliated with USC or the county health department.

Briefings are a proactive form of outreach in which we go to the show with our experts. For example, I took writer and surgeon Atul Gawande to meet with two big shows, including "ER." He is working with an organization on a safer surgical checklist, and "ER" incorporated some of his content into one of the shows.

We work with medical and non-medical shows, dramas and comedies, prime-time and daytime, and they're all scripted shows. We've worked with over 100 TV series on five broadcast networks and 12 cable networks. Some of these shows have as many as 20 million viewers per episode in the United States alone, and many more worldwide. If you've heard of the show — like "Grey's Anatomy," "The Practice," "House," "Law and Order," "CSI" — we've probably consulted with them. Most of

the medical shows have a physician on staff but one physician can't be an expert in all fields, so that's why they work with us.

Q: How do you track the impact of a specific show?

A: Some of the shows send us the script ahead of time, and we'll develop a questionnaire based on the content. A week before the story airs, we put out the questionnaire to get a baseline of knowledge, attitudes or behavior around a particular health topic, and a week later, we do the questionnaire again and measure the change.

We consulted on a story called "Tony's HIV" with "The Bold and the Beautiful." We asked the network if we could air a public service announcement in which Tony, the lead actor, refers people to the CDC hotline. It was aired at two dramatic plot points — when Tony was told that he was HIV-positive and later, when he told his fiancé that he was HIV-positive. We measured calls to the hotline for 12 months and mapped all of the other times when there were referrals on air to that hotline. For example, "60 Minutes" did a special on HIV and referred people to the hotline. The biggest peak was on the day that Tony told Kristen that he was HIV-positive. It went way beyond referrals from "60 Minutes," the surgeon general and MTV. That is the power of storytelling, and when we refer people to seek further information or to take an action at a dramatic point in the storyline, it has much greater impact

than any traditional public health campaign.

There's a theory called "transportation," and we've found that when viewers strongly identify with a character in a story, they become "transported" — and come to see these characters as being people they care deeply about. That's when they take in the (health) message — more so than when a credible person comes on TV and says, "This is what you should do and here's why."

Q: Are there typical requests from writers and producers?

A: We get requests from shows such as "We need our character to go to the medicine cabinet, take something, and be dead in an hour" — show us what that looks like. Another might be: "How would an ob-gyn practicing in the 1960s tell his patient that she is pregnant, and this is the complication?" It could be anything.

We accept no money from the entertainment industry, and we ask for no credits. It keeps us agenda-free to promote accurate health content in TV storylines. We recognize that writers and producers have very different motives than public health professionals. They are the best storytellers in the world, and that's what they're about. We're here to make it easy for them to incorporate accurate information if they so choose.

LJ Anderson writes on health matters every Wednesday. She can be reached at lj.anderson@yahoo.com or www.ljanderson.com.

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