

EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF MEDICAL DRAMAS: DO BENEFITS OUTNUMBER
LIMITATIONS?

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Educational Value of Medical Dramas: Do Benefits Outnumber Limitations?

The modern system of education incorporates a huge variety of methods and sources of information. Students have access to online publications and printed journals, professional textbooks and semi-professional books, video lessons and speeches of the prominent people within their field of study. Some of these approaches are favored and supported by educators, whereas other methods are considered not reliable enough and are believed to develop an erroneous perception of one's future profession. For medical students, one of the most disputable sources of professional information is medical TV shows that are rather numerous and popular. Not all of such melodramas may be considered as a good source of learning, but, at the same time, not all of them are too far from reality. Researchers note that television dramas can teach students about professional communication and the basics of patient care. However, to take away the most helpful data from such TV shows, it is necessary for educators to analyze them and suggest to their students the ones that are truly beneficial for the future professional development. The present paper discusses the negative and positive features of medical dramas and their impact on students.

The Reasons for and Consequences of Watching Medical TV Shows

Every viewer has reasons for watching particular TV programs. Some people watch them for entertainment, others – for relaxation, and another category of the audience is seeking for something that might be useful in their academic or professional life. Medical students have probably the greatest choice of shows based on their future professional life. The major goal of watching these shows, according to Lee and Taylor (2014), is not purely health orientation. These students mostly choose to watch medical melodramas because they find them entertaining.

However, as research shows, the learners' health information motive is the strongest one determining their choice of TV shows (Lee and Taylor, 2014). Apart from the information motive, the following reasons for watching have been identified: social interaction, habitual pastime, entertainment, and relaxation. What is particularly interesting is the fact that while medical dramas induce students to seek health-related information, they also decrease the amount of time spent on viewing (Lee and Taylor, 2014). The reason for such tendency is that when medical students concentrate on finding the answers to some health-related questions they saw in a TV show, they do not have enough time to watch the show but, instead, dedicate their efforts to researching the issues that interest them.

What concerns consequences of watching medical melodramas, they are diverse. In the majority of cases, students obtain a more positive feeling about their future profession and the environment in which they will be working (Weaver *et al.*, 2013). Along with this factor, students also admit that TV shows may have an adverse influence on nurses' public image. Therefore, it is crucial for the creators of such shows to pay attention to picturing medical workers in the most accurate way so that students would get a proper impression of their future job.

Educational Benefits of Watching Medical Melodramas

Researchers note that under appropriate guidance, medical melodramas may become rather advantageous sources of educational material (Hirt *et al.*, 2012; Weaver *et al.*, 2013; Weaver, Wilson and Langendyk, 2014). In their study of eight popular medical dramas, Hirt *et al.* (2012) analyze the educational benefits of these shows. For instance, the authors note that such medical dramas as *ER*, *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Nurse Jackie* discuss the issues of professionalism, communication, inter-professional skills, and interpersonal conflicts. In *Cardiac*

Arrest, the question of medical hierarchy is elucidated. *Northern Exposure* depicts the peculiarities of alternative and rural medicine and aboriginal health (Hirt *et al.*, 2012). Medical hierarchy and mentorship are the key points of such dramas as *Cardiac Arrest*, *ER*, *Scrubs*, and *Grey's Anatomy*. In *Doc Martin*, there is a focus on community-based and primary care. Finally, such an essential aspect of medical profession as ethics is one of the major points in such medical TV shows as *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *ER* (Hirt *et al.*, 2012). As these research results indicate, medical dramas elucidate a number of rather important questions pertaining to medicine that might be helpful for potential doctors and nurses. Students who watch these shows pay attention to interpersonal conflicts and ways of resolving them, as well as to different medical situations and approaches to managing them.

When asked about their opinion on medical dramas, students admit that such shows have impact on their attitude to learning and profession (Weaver *et al.*, 2013). Medical students say that there is a lot of information that can be implemented at work or in their learning practice. In addition, students consider that such TV shows suggest extra knowledge on a variety of professional subjects (Weaver *et al.*, 2013). Viewers also remark that they would like to have live shows rather than melodramas because the latter do not always reflect the authentic and accurate state of events. Still, students agree that medical dramas have a strong educational effect that can be increased if some inconsistencies are removed.

Disparities in Medical TV Shows That May Lead to Erroneous Understanding of the Future Profession

While many studies indicate that medical melodramas have many benefits for learners, there are also opinions that such shows have an adverse impact on viewers, especially the ones who are considering medicine as a future profession. In

her research, Farkas (2013) remarks that there may be harmful outcomes of erroneous illness narrative. Particularly, the researcher notes that such narrative may be counterproductive or even "pathological" (Farkas, 2013, p. 315). As a result, viewers may receive an incorrect perception of medical conditions and ways of managing them. Farkas (2013) considers *House* a source of unrealistic reflection of patient-doctor relationships in which there is no place for the patient-centered approach. The author remarks that instead of picturing the ways of treating people, this medical drama presents patients as the "obstacles" for doctors who are solving the cases as detectives (Farkas, 2013, p. 317). Thus, the viewers may obtain an unrealistic understanding of the profession and hospital environment, in which patients' opinions are neglected, and doctors care more about satisfying their self-affirmation needs than about their customers' welfare.

Another example of a medical drama watching which may cause a detrimental effect, as suggested by Farkas (2013), is *Mystery Diagnosis*. This show is focused on patients' road to triumph over the disease, but the author remarks that the choice of telling the story is not the most successful one. For instance, while the creators of the show state that doctors and patients need to be cautious about unusual diseases, they underestimate the scientific value of medicine and emphasize its importance as an art (Farkas, 2013). In addition, the author remarks that in *Mystery Diagnosis*, diseases are described too much metaphorically, whereas it is necessary to show their practical implications.

Research by Hinkelbein *et al.* (2014) also points out the unrealistic portrayal of medical conditions in TV shows. The scholars remark that resuscitation in *Emergency Room* is not reflected in an accurate way. Only one out of 136 cases of cardiopulmonary resuscitation cases depicted in the show was dealt with in

accordance with American Heart Association's guidelines (Hinkelbein *et al.*, 2014). Thus, research indicates that if medical students rely on TV shows too much, they may develop an erroneous notion of dealing with serious health issues, which may lead to dramatic outcomes for the patients.

Conclusion

Medical melodramas have earned the affection of millions of viewers. However, while for some people these shows are merely a kind of entertainment, medical students frequently consider them a possibility to gain extra knowledge and expertise in professional practice. Some educators and researchers agree that medical TV shows may have an advantageous educational impact while others think that melodramas have very little in common with real-life situations. There is one point in which everyone agrees: the benefits from watching such shows will occur if students receive advice from their professors on which series they should watch for particular outcomes. If educators pay efforts to research what TV shows reflect specific medical cases in the most precise manner, they can recommend these shows to their students without worrying that the latter will misunderstand some professional issues. In addition, students should discuss their impressions and suggestions in the classroom so that educators could evaluate their comprehension.

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