

Now's the Right Time for 'Dr. Kildare' and 'Ben Casey'

■ **Television:** Medical series of the past dealt with important societal issues. Such shows are needed more than ever today.

By JOSEPH TUROW
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Scenario for a television drama: Ben Casey's grandson is talking to Marcus Welby's grandson, debating a dangerous operation for an aging political figure. Instead of discussing the pros and cons of surgery, though, they're arguing over the operation's expense and whether the patient's health plan will cover it.

Improbable in real life? Not at all. But we haven't heard these kinds of arguments on television dramas. It's about time we did.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, prime-time television's fictional portrayals of doctors and hospitals were an intimate part of the public discussion of health care. Popular myth has it that shows such as "Dr. Kildare," "Ben Casey," "Medical Center" and "The Bold Ones" were notable primarily for the masculine hunks who paraded through them in medical

garb. It is often forgotten that many of those shows got society talking about important social problems too.

Certainly the boundaries of medical depiction were limited. For a long time, TV network censors were hesitant to allow problems such as venereal disease and abortion into plots. During the 1960s, the medical Establishment, through the American Medical Assn., enjoyed almost complete control over the scripts of most shows, so that the business and politics of medicine were rarely portrayed. In addition, producers adhered to a tried-and-true formula that depicted medicine as an unlimited resource typically giddied by specialist-physicians in high-tech hospitals.

Yet, doctor shows over the years did explore a panoply of issues at the intersection of health and human relationships. Child abuse, epilepsy, mental retardation, senility, breast cancer, drug abuse and other high-profile topics became launching pads for lessons about professional norms, medical prowess and human resilience. Producers of "Dr. Kildare," "Ben Casey," "The Nurses," "Marcus Welby," "The Lazarus Syndrome,"

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"Medical Story" and other series often saw themselves as successors to TV's so-called Golden Age of 1950s anthology programming. To them, the medical scene was a broad canvas on which to paint pains and joys, fights and compromises that were real to all viewers.

By the mid-1970s, though, the image of the sanitized medical hero in high-tech, damn-the-cost health-care situations became so stale that it fell under the weight of its own clichés. Influenced by "MASH," doctor shows such as "St. Elsewhere" began to shift from a primary spotlight on patients and their problems to a focus on young professionals and their yuppified Angst.

During the past few years, as medicine has seen increasing political and economic turmoil, medical programs have almost disappeared from prime-time network television. Feature films, for their part, have dwelt on dark extremes of doctoring that TV never showed. Movies such as "Lorenzo's Oil," "The Doctor" and "The Fugitive" tar the medical Establishment with the broad brush of fallibility and corruption.

Clearly missing from the entertainment industry are attempts to come to terms with the health-care debate and its implications for American society. Ironically, the

topic might be just right for the television networks, reeling as they are from political blows that challenge violence on their airwaves. The problems and possibilities posed by the new health-care system offer an attractive alternative. Dilemmas of managed and fee-for-service care, ethical and religious questions that center on senior citizens and terminally ill patients, the changing status of physicians within new health-care formats—these and related issues reverberate with life-and-death predicaments that could spark fascinating, ratings-grabbing dramas.

It might be objected that news alone is the proper forum for health-care analyses. Carried out responsibly, though, popular entertainment can enlarge the audience for issues in ways news cannot. Dramatic scenarios based

on political debates can let viewers see alternatives played out. Well-told tales can encourage people to feel the options so they will want to argue about what they have experienced.

A new generation of medical shows that encourages a variety of viewpoints can serve a crucial role in helping American society shape its new health-care era.

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