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THE EXPERTS

How TV Gets Hospitals All Wrong

Jun 9, 2014 6:47 am ET



LEAH BINDER: People think that the television image of medicine is true-to-life because, after all, TV hospitals *look* realistic enough, so we assume they mirror real-life hospitals. But that's the case only through a funhouse mirror.

One quick way to comprehend the level of distortion on your screen is by playing a game of "Count the Characters." Tune to your favorite hospital drama and count how many characters are nurses and how many are doctors. More likely than not, you will find about 10 doctors for every one nurse. The reality is roughly the opposite: There are about 10 times more nurses than physicians in the hospital down the street from you. Most of what hospitals do is deliver expert nursing care.

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If you believe the TV image, however, you imagine that if you get admitted to the hospital you'll be immediately surrounded by five or 10 (exceptionally good-looking) physicians. They will work all the complex technology at your bedside and monitor your every breath during your stay. If your life needs saving, they will be there first.

I'm convinced it's these media-inspired assumptions that come into play when people who are admitted to a real hospital express amazement, even shock, about the extent of their nursing care. They can't believe how much knowledge the nurses demonstrate. Many are surprised they only occasionally see a physician, while nurses dominate their care around the clock. "Heavens, my life was in the hands of my nurses!" said one of my friends, equally impressed and dismayed.

There's a fascinating book about this, "Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nursing Puts us All at Risk," and a movement I support to

pressure the entertainment industry to make some effort to acknowledge the actual work of nurses. Beyond the fact it's plainly wrong for Hollywood to obscure the vital work of nurses, it's also clearly bad for our health as patients. The best and the brightest young people might think from watching TV that it's a waste of their talents to aspire to a career in nursing, but we need them! We also need to reverse the nursing shortage.

I admit it's entertaining to think George Clooney will care for you every moment you're in the hospital. But in real life, none of us should ever entrust our lives to a hospital without top-notch nurses and high quality nursing leadership.

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