

# Television - Boon Or Bane To Medicine

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What does the public think of the physician? What does the public believe the physician's role in modern society to be? These questions are asked, or should be asked, by both layman and doctor. With the increasing complexity of our society, and with rapid changes taking place daily, the importance of communication between professional groups and the people they serve is becoming more and more evident. Man has always had a deep interest in his own body, in disease, and in the treatment of disease. How is television handling this question, and what effect, if any, is it having on the doctor-patient relationship? These are interesting questions, and ones that have yet to be answered satisfactorily.

When the words television and medicine are mentioned together the first thing that comes to mind is, no doubt, the weekly medidrama (a word coined by some fertile mind in the advertising industry). Included under this category are shows such as *Ben Casey*, *Dr. Kildare*, *The Eleventh Hour*, *The Nurses*, etc. These shows portray in a somewhat histrionic fashion, the lives of physicians in large hospitals, their interactions with each other, the staff, and the patients entrusted to them. Most members of the medical profession view these shows (using the word view figuratively) with varying degrees of disdain, often dismissing them with a few well-chosen words. There is another side to the coin however. What does the public think of these programs? They have been on the air for several years now, and new ones are being produced annually. Therefore it seems safe to assume that the public is watching them. Now, there is a difference between watching the program with the idea in the back of one's mind that it is just fiction, and watching the program believing it to be truth or near truth. If the majority of viewers hold with the latter view, medicine may profit, or may be damaged. Let me illustrate the point with an example. In one episode of a series a patient is presented as being ill with an obscure but interesting entity. Dr. C. wants to operate in the hope (slim though it be) of achieving a cure. An industrious young pathologist hears of the rare entity, and goes to the patient with the request that he sign an autopsy permission form before operation, in the event that Dr. C. is unsuccessful. Assuming that many in the audience will identify with the patient, how will this audience tend to think of pathologists in the future? This, of course, is an extreme example used merely to illustrate a point. Everyone will agree that in order to produce a show that will entertain, some dramatic license is necessary. However, this type of thing, if carried to excess, could have an effect on medicine that is not desirable.

*The Eleventh Hour*, a drama starring a psychiatrist and a psychologist is illustrative of another detrimental tendency in these shows. Besides confusing the audience about the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist (in this show there isn't any), the writers have cast the central characters as being rather like minor deities. They tend to stand above and away from the patient and his problem. They manipulate the action without ever condescending to join it, thus depicting an extreme father-image, a strong authority figure who is all-seeing and all-knowing. While there is a longing in all of us to be directed by this type of image, there is an inevitable resentment against persons in power, a desire for independence. This feeling has be-

  
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come more evident in recent years, and some segments of the population tend to regard the physician as rather too powerful. He represents, if you will, a person who has some insight into the mysteries of the body, and the power to alleviate suffering in some cases. He is regarded as essential to life, but the inevitable authority he wields tends to be resented by some people, although a passive dependent personality will react differently. It is an interesting phenomenon in our society that, while the public expresses some distrust of doctors in general, they tend to regard their family practitioner differently. Thus 'my doctor' may be a good fellow, but the 'medical society' cannot be trusted. Perhaps the medical shows tend to reinforce this idea; perhaps not.

I have not yet touched upon another type of TV program which has recently been seen on our screens. Most of you have probably seen the show *Check-up*, a summer replacement program that made a rather honest attempt to deal with diseases, the doctor, and the patient. It consisted of a moderator, a family physician, a specialist, and a group of laymen. A disease (e.g. arthritis) would be simply described by the physician, and the floor would then be opened for questions from the audience. I do not know what public reaction was to the program, but I imagine that its ratings were somewhat lower than *Ben Casey's*. What can we infer from this? There are several possibilities. Perhaps realism is not what the public wants; they may want to be entertained, not educated. Or, they may not watch TV in the summertime. But, although the majority of people may not be interested in a factual type of program, some will be. Some people may gain a bit of insight into the aims and aspirations of medicine. They may like it, they may not, but at least they will have food for thought.

Lastly, I shall discuss the interview, wherein some physician is questioned about his or her society's work. It is here that medicine can do much good work. Any physician appearing on television is representing medicine in general as well as himself. This is the role in which television can be most valuable in informing the public of progress in medicine, of its aims, and of its ideals. Gone are the days when the profession felt the public should know as little as possible. The public wants to know, they want to be treated as intelligent human beings. They deserve explanations that they understand, for if they understand they will be sympathetic. Newton Minow has called television 'the great wasteland'—for medicine it may be the great opportunity.

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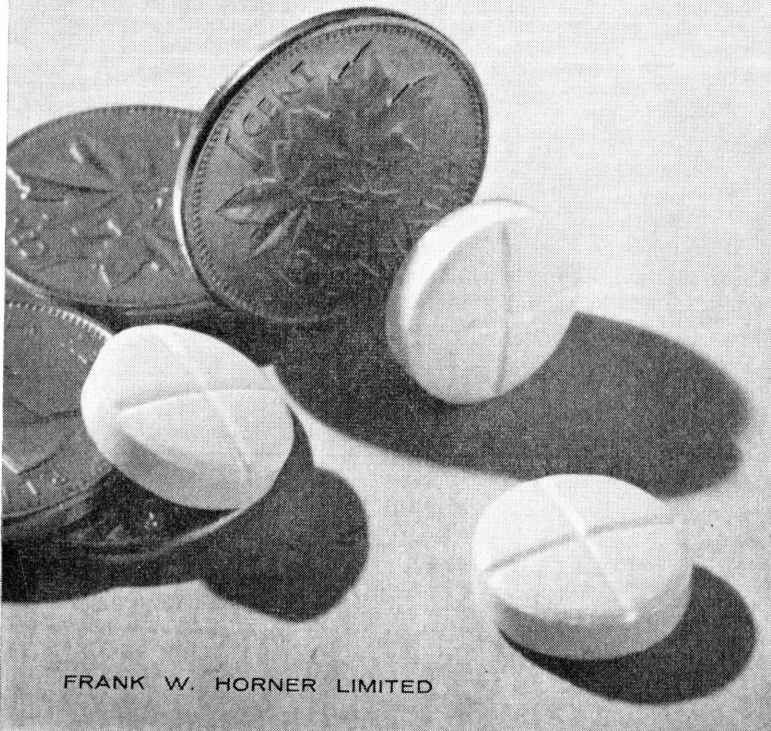
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