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Media Help Shape Perception of Doctors

By Adam Reger

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Ryan McGarry (MED '09), executive producer of the successful CBS medical drama *Code Black*, said such shows give physicians an opportunity to "take back the bedside," controlling the public perception and narrative of what doctors do.

McGarry, who is also a clinical instructor of emergency medicine at Cornell University's Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City, spoke at Pitt on May 24, delivering a lecture, "*Code Black* and the Television Doctor Paradox: Popular and Powerless in the 21st Century."

He noted that this fall's prime-time network lineup will feature four medical dramas, including *Code Black*, making the genre the most-watched television programming after sports.

McGarry presented a lengthy list of shows extending back to the 1950s, showing how medical dramas have evolved over time—as have their portrayals of physicians. He played the end credits of an episode of an early medical drama, *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, which featured the seal of approval of the American Academy of General Practice (now the American Academy of Family Physicians). Dramas of that era, he said, tended to depict doctors as fatherly figures who were rarely, if ever, wrong. Over the years, medical dramas have added realism (*ER*) while some have embraced soap opera-like storylines (*Grey's Anatomy*), and others have depicted doctors as flawed figures and even antiheroes (*House M.D.*).

Despite the sometimes less-than-flattering depictions of physicians, medicine still fascinates many Americans, who tend to view doctors as people of integrity and strong character, McGarry said. Research has shown that most viewers can distinguish the fanciful elements of medical dramas, such as romantic subplots, from aspects they perceive as realistic, such as emergency surgeries.

These facts present doctors with both a challenge and an opportunity, McGarry said.

He echoed the comments of Brian A. Primack, director of Pitt's Center for Research on Media, Technology, and Health, who introduced McGarry and noted that the average American spends one hour a year speaking with a doctor, and 104 hours a year watching medical dramas on television.

"We have the benefit of the doubt, thanks to these dramas," McGarry said. "But I'm not

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convinced we use it well.”

The medical community too often practices “inward communication,” McGarry said, speaking not to the general public but to an audience of their peers. Medical dramas, as well as emerging media like blogs and podcasts, present opportunities to “take back the bedside,” controlling the narrative of what physicians do.

While McGarry’s busy career takes him between New York and Los Angeles, his show-business career began as a student in Pitt’s School of Medicine. As a fourth-year student choosing an area of specialization, McGarry was drawn to emergency medicine, thanks to the influence of instructors like Paul M. Paris, a Pitt professor of emergency medicine.

“I knew emergency medicine had something special for me,” McGarry said. “I liked how Dr. Paris thinks, and I thought, ‘This is something I can do.’”

McGarry took advantage of the school’s option allowing students to complete rotations at hospital departments outside of Pittsburgh, choosing a four-week rotation at Los Angeles County General Hospital, a public hospital that treats a high number of trauma cases.

Even during his brief rotation, McGarry recognized the hospital’s emergency department, and, in particular, the famous “C-Booth” trauma bay where doctors and nurses struggle to save gunshot and accident victims, as possessing all the ingredients for a successful film: a powerful setting, strong characters, and compelling drama. He wrote to Joan Harvey, Pitt medical school’s associate dean for student affairs, asking whether he could extend his rotation by another four weeks so he could begin making a film about the hospital. Harvey agreed.

“There is no film and no television show without Dr. Harvey’s incredible vision and support,” McGarry said.

He went on to spend his medical residency at the county hospital filming, editing, and marketing the documentary film, *Code Black*, which received rave reviews from *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, and won the Best Documentary award at the 2013 Los Angeles Film Festival. CBS then brought *Code Black* to the small screen as a medical drama in the fall of 2015. The show was recently renewed for a second season.

The presentation was sponsored by Pitt’s Center for Research on Media, Technology, and Health; the Health Policy Institute; and the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute.

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