

# TV Medical Dramas for Dummies

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

A doctor's life is often busy and stressful, with little free time left for proper relaxation. So whenever we get a few hours to ourselves, we make full use of them to do what we love best – in my case, catching up with my favourite TV series. I'm an avid follower of a large number of TV shows, but derive the greatest enjoyment from watching medical dramas in particular. Surprisingly, I've discovered that not many local doctors are aware of these high-calibre programmes. Perhaps I may pique your interest with the following "user's guide".

One of my fondest early memories of medical school is sitting down in front of the television twice a week to watch "ER" and "Chicago Hope". Both series began in 1994 (when I entered first year) and quickly gained large followings with their gritty portrayals of medical professionals, as well as for tackling controversial issues ranging from teenage abortions and euthanasia to recent hot topics like cloning and biological warfare.

Although I felt that "Chicago Hope" was superior to "ER" in every way, the latter appealed to the masses with its non-stop action, blood, guts, and of course, George Clooney. The former, on the other hand, delved deep into the psyches of its characters, the most memorable of which were cardiothoracic surgeon Dr Jeffrey Geiger (played with great aplomb by Mandy Patinkin) and the hospital's troubled but capable legal counsel, Alan "The Eel" Birch (Peter MacNicol). Combined, these two possessed more emotional angst than the entire cast of "ER" put together, and were the heart and soul of the show. This was vintage David E. Kelley in top form, so when Geiger and "The Eel" left "Chicago Hope" later in the season, things started to deteriorate.

In an obvious bid to outdo its competition, "Chicago Hope" changed its opening theme, introduced a slew of new doctors including cardiothoracic surgeon cum femme fatale, Dr Kate Austin (Christine Lahti), and over the next few years, three completely unbelievable female characters in the forms of an adolescent-looking neurosurgeon and

two other bimbos. The producers and writers may have tried to make the show an equal-opportunity workplace crawling with beautiful, sexy and talented female doctors, but with the exception of Lahti – a fine actress in her own right – the other women failed to bring any intelligence, wit or glamour to their roles, despite spewing medical jargon, wearing short, tight skirts and way too much make-up.

In contrast, the writers of "ER" quickly gained momentum, churning out one great episode after another. The show even broke new ground by airing a live telecast shot in real time a few years ago. Using a hand-held camera that followed the action from room to room, it was television at its best, and executed perfectly. After that astounding feat, I was hooked.

Although it has weathered some reshuffling of characters, most of the original actors – Anthony Edwards (Dr Mark Greene), Noah Wyle (Dr John Carter) and Eriq La Salle (Dr Peter Benton) – have stoically stayed on, and even battled a variety of major life crises such as a brain tumour, drug addiction and raising a young deaf son, respectively. Put in the wrong hands, these almost implausible plot developments could have degenerated into pure melodrama. But the show's excellent combination of writers, directors and actors keeps it grounded, and most importantly, completely believable.

Now we come to my personal favourite – "C.S.I.", which to the uninitiated, stands for "Crime Scene Investigation". Besides establishing itself as an exceptional medical/criminal drama series that has managed to topple "ER" from its top spot after just one season, it is also the brainchild of Jerry Bruckheimer (the prolific producer of major blockbusters like "Top Gun", "Black Hawk Down" and the reality TV show "The Amazing Race").

Set in the flashy state of Las Vegas, the "C.S.I." team comprises an equally flashy set of personalities. There's Catherine Willows (Marg Helgenberger), who used to work as an exotic dancer before earning

a college degree and becoming a crime scene investigator. Sara Sidle (Jorja Fox) is pretty but tomboyish, with a degree in physics from Harvard University, and a special interest in materials and element analysis. The other piece of eye candy is Nick Stokes (George Eads), who combines brains with brawn, and shows remarkable insight when analysing crime scenes, making you forget the fact that he looks like a Chippendales dancer. Bringing up the rear are Warrick Brown (Gary Dourdan), who occasionally gets into trouble over gambling debts, and Detective Jim Brass (John Guilloyle), the steadfast father figure who's always ready to defend the "C.S.I." team if ever questioned.

The most watchable cast member, however, is William Petersen. He plays Gil Grissom, a closet entomologist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of everything from famous quotes to the topography of Las Vegas. The writers made the smart move of keeping his professional life transparent, while shedding little or close to no light on his personal one. He is beloved by all his team members, who admire and respect him for his tireless attempts to catch perpetrators, and who adopt his now-famous motto: "The evidence never lies."

Strutting around in leather jackets, sporting fashionable hairdos and goatees, and flaunting toned physiques, the cast of "C.S.I." provides audiences with a hip group of crime-fighters for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Add some cool medical facts and bizarre cases (e.g. a dead scuba diver found stuck in a tree in the middle of a raging forest fire), and you've got a winner.

With "ER" in its umpteenth season and losing a little steam, "C.S.I." will be a worthy successor. Channel 5 started airing its pilot season only a few months ago, so catch it before it's too late – I guarantee that you will not be sorry! ■

#### **Timeslots for programmes mentioned in this article are as follows:**

"C.S.I." – pilot season: Channel 5, Wednesdays 11 pm

2<sup>nd</sup> season: just ended

Reruns of "Chicago Hope" may return to SCV in the future.

#### About the Author:

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