

Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

## The Reluctant Hero



“Treating illnesses is why we became doctors. Treating patients is what makes most doctors miserable.” Certainly, there is no one-size-fits-all remedy for pain therapy and prevention, even for a single type of pain.

Meet Dr Gregory House: self-proclaimed “bored, certified diagnostician”, unwitting poster boy of pain (physical/emotional/professional), and without a doubt, the most beloved doctor ever to hit the small screen. His surliness and sarcasm mirror great predecessors like Jeffrey Geiger (*Chicago Hope*), Peter Benton (*ER*) and Perry Cox (*Scrubs*); characters who raged and railed at injustice and authority, yet won unanimous respect from all corners with their brilliance.

House, however, takes the Art of Gripping to a whole new level. While Geiger et al relish patient contact, he absolutely abhors it. While others make snap life-and-death decisions with precise confidence (thus invariably saving the day), he’s been known to play Russian roulette with septic, hypotensive neonates. He mercilessly chides hypochondriacs, hates anxious parents and remains impenetrably reticent with even the most demanding patients.

*“9 times out of 10 there’s no reason to talk to a patient,” he declares. When asked “How can you treat someone without seeing him?”, he calmly replies, “It’s easy if you don’t get crap about it.”*

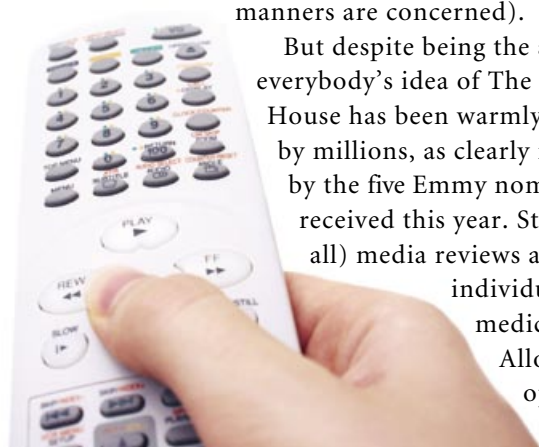
Rounds are conducted in his office, symptoms and differential diagnoses scribbled on a white board, treatments discussed then dispensed by his team of residents (who, ironically, are his polar opposites where bedside manners are concerned).

But despite being the antithesis of everybody’s idea of The Good Doctor, House has been warmly embraced by millions, as clearly illustrated by the five Emmy nominations it received this year. Still, most (if not all) media reviews are written by individuals outside the medical profession. Allow me to offer opinions from a physician’s



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perspective and list the top three reasons I consider this the finest medical drama series in existence.

### 1. Hugh Laurie

46 years old, a Cambridge University alumnus and, according to my Editor, formerly on the institution's world-renowned rowing team, Laurie has acted in British TV shows (*Jeeves and Wooster*, and *Blackadder*), written for the likes of London's *The Daily Telegraph*, penned a novel (*The Gun Seller*) and even composed and recorded songs.

Thanks to a stroke of casting genius, he was chosen for the lead role and has played it with nothing short of impish glee, spewing caustic lines with clipped impatience, the odd cocked eyebrow, smirk or grimace perfectly timed and executed.

He may not have won the Best Actor Emmy this time round (that went to James Spader from *Boston Legal*), but my money's on him getting it next year.

### 2. The Supporting Cast

Ranging from respected veterans (Robert Sean Leonard, best known for his heartbreaking turn in *Dead Poets Society*) to fresh new faces (gorgeous Jennifer Morrison and Australian Jesse Spencer), they complement Laurie wonderfully, consistently giving sensitive, poignant performances, sometimes even besting House himself with their unexpected bursts of deadpan wit. My current personal favourite is Spencer, who plays Dr Robert Chase, an intriguing figure with an equally fascinating past (he went to seminary school but switched to medicine, supposedly under pressure from his physician father). A recent episode placed him centrestage during an emotional debate with a nun about the concepts of faith and redemption. Spencer's compassionate, understated delivery was a pleasure to watch, and may turn out to be his winning formula (you can also catch him in the enjoyable comedy *Uptown Girls*).

### 3. David Shore

Of course, every successful series begins with excellent writing, and no one does it better than Shore, whose past credits include work on *Law & Order*, *The Outer Limits* and *The Practice*. The creator and executive producer of *House* just picked up this year's Emmy for "Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series",

and pens the most insightful, hilarious scripts, simultaneously poking fun at the medical profession as well as its associated idiosyncrasies.

*"What would you want?" asks House. "A doctor who holds your hand while you die, or a doctor who ignores you while you get better? I guess it would particularly suck to have a doctor who ignores you while you die."*

This is just one of the countless gems Shore proffers each week, from marital advice ("The most successful marriages are based on lies.") to musings on religion ("Becoming a nun doesn't make you a saint.") and views about death ("It's easier to die than to watch someone die.").

The show's main premise: a frantic evaluation of baffling signs and symptoms, has thrown up conditions as exotic as sub-acute sclerosing panencephalitis (SSPE) and Churg-Strauss syndrome. Not too long ago, even vancomycin-resistant enterococcus (RE) entered the picture, to my immense delight. As for those who love complex procedures, you can get healthy doses of Swan-Ganz catheterisations, cricothyrotomies and endotracheal intubations every other week.

Ultimately, however, Shore scores because he lets House say "the things we all want to say", whether it's about annoying adults ("People don't bug me till they get teeth."), having our abilities questioned ("I've been a doctor for years. *Why* do I have to keep assuring people I know what I'm doing?"), or confrontations ("Oh crap, another reason I don't like meeting patients. They don't know what you look like they can't yell at you.").

*"This is the guy who tells the idiots they're idiots." - David Shore*

And he does it with grace, wit and style. Many of us obviously can't follow in Dr House's footsteps, but it never hurts to live vicariously through his exploits. ■

*House Season 1 currently airs every Tuesday night at 10pm on Starhub cable AXN Channel 19, and is also available on DVD.*