

# Television's Portrayal of Doctors

## Effects on the Public and the Profession

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# Brief History of Television



August 26, 1930, Philo T. Farnsworth, a Utah farm boy: Patent #1,773,980 for electronic TV

April 1939 RCA's David Sarnoff announces first commercial broadcast TV; settles with Farnsworth for \$1,000,000

World War 2 stops TV's commercial development

**Medic**    **1954-55**

***“The Eye of an Eagle, the Heart of Lion, the Hands of a Woman”***



Creator James Moser copied the style of his earlier show:

**Technical accuracy and unquestioned competence and integrity but ignored doctors' personal lives, weaknesses, or motivations.**



***Medic* also established the template that most later doctor shows followed: Hospital-based, acute illnesses resolved in the allotted time.**

Both had the imprimatur of their professional organizations: the ***Los Angeles Police Department*** and the ***Los Angeles County Medical Society***. The latter reviewed all scripts to ensure an idealized presentation of doctors.

# *Dr. Kildare* 1961-66

## *“Three Stars Will Shine Tonight”*



Dr. Kildare was based on a series of radio shows and movies from the 1930-40's. Richard Chamberlin's Kildare was an **imperfect, inexperienced but earnest young doctor** mentored by Raymond Massey's acerbic Dr. Gillispie.

# Guest stars on Dr. Kildare

[Eddie Albert](#)

[Ron Howard](#)

[Leonard Nimoy](#)

[Ed Asner](#)

[Brian Keith](#)

[Carroll O'Connor](#)

[Tom Bosley](#)

[Ted Knight](#)

[Suzanne Pleshette](#)

[Robert Culp](#)

[Harvey Korman](#)

[Robert Reed](#)

[Angie Dickinson](#)

[Carolyn Jones](#)

[William Shatner](#)

[Barbara Eden](#)

[Jack Lord](#)

[Jean Stapleton](#)

[Linda Evans](#)

[Walter Matthau](#)

[Sam Waterston](#)

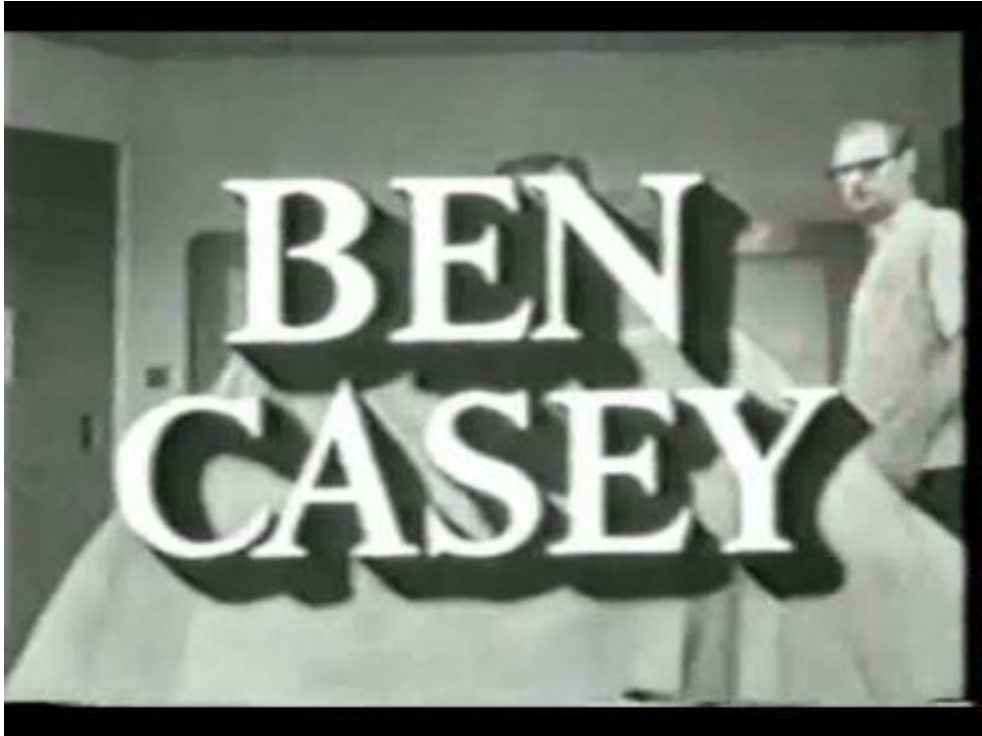
[Peter Falk](#)

[Gavin McLeod](#)

[Robert Young](#)

## *Ben Casey* 1961-66

***"Man, Woman, Birth, Death, Infinity!"***



Vince Edward's *Ben Casey* was a brilliant young neurosurgeon, who battled administrators and other doctors to help his patients. His first words were:

***"What the hell are you using for brains?"***

***Dr. Kildare*** and ***Ben Casey*** forever established “**Doctor**” shows on U.S. TV.

Police/Detective shows	~300	Lawyer shows	~125
Westerns	~190	Doctor shows	~109

### **Favorite Programs of 4-6<sup>th</sup> graders in 1963**

1. Beverly Hillbillies
2. The Lucy Show
3. The Dick Van Dyke Show
4. Combat
5. Family Classics
6. **Ben Casey**
7. Red Skelton Show
8. Bonanza
9. Twilight Zone
10. **Dr. Kildare**



**“Pulling a “Ben Casey””** i.e. doing something outrageously bold, became a catch phrase for MDs. The show ended in 1966, but even in 1990 a medical student said: “The only CAT scan I’d ever seen was on ***Ben Casey*** on TV!” (But the CT scan was invented in 1971!)

Blumenfeld (***Psychol Rep (1964) 15: 901-902***), in a survey of 1000 high school students and 1000 of their parents, found watching these shows was associated with:

- 1) Holding positive attitudes toward physicians and healthcare**
- 2) Thinking medical training is shorter than reality**

## *Marcus Welby M.D.* 1969-75

***“Marcus Welby is dead: now who is your advocate?”***



***Marcus Welby M.D.***, was outpatient, not hospital-based, and emphasized the doctor-patient relationship not technology. Robert Young played this kindly, but often paternalistic, physician involved in every aspect of his patient's life and health.

(What a perfect fit for the star of ***“Father Knows Best”***).



His patients rarely died and if they did so, he was at their side.

Only 8 percent were working class, 2 percent were over sixty years old, and 90 percent were white.

He was rarely pressured for time or interrupted by the needs of other patients.

## **The Marcus Welby Impact factor**

# PubMed search for "Marcus Welby" December 2019

[.The \*\*Marcus Welby\*\* Moment .](#) Lee SY. Fam Med. 2017 49:234-235.

[Generational issues in the ob-gyn workplace:](#)

["\*\*Marcus Welby\*\*, MD," versus "Scrubs".](#)

Ansbacher R. Obstet Gynecol. 2010 116:1454-5

[Generational issues in the Ob-Gyn workplace:](#)

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Thabes RB. Fam Pract Manag. 2009 16:13.

[Where are you, \*\*Marcus Welby\*\*, MD? Recognize and respond to threats to professionalism.](#)

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[Privacy issues in clinical genomic medicine, or \*\*Marcus Welby\*\*, M.D., meets the \\$1000 genome.](#)  
Alpert S. Camb Q Healthc Ethics. 2008 17:373-84.

[From \*\*Marcus Welby\*\* to Grey's anatomy: the next generation.](#) Kirch DG. MedGenMed. 2007 9:15.

[The Remarkable Staying Power of "Death Panels".](#)  
Frankford DM. J Health Polit Policy Law. 2015 40:1087-101.

[\*\*Marcus Welby\*\* and the medical home.](#)

Marker J. Fam Pract Manag. 2008 15:10-1.

[Generational issues in the ob-gyn workplace: "\*\*Marcus Welby\*\*, MD," versus "Scrubs".](#)

Stein A. Obstet Gynecol. 2011 117:407

# The Best “Doctor” Show

8<sup>th</sup>-best of all time *TV Guide* 2016 (*The Sopranos* #1)

5th-best written TV series *Writers’ Guild of America* 2013 (*The Sopranos* #1)

16<sup>th</sup>-best ever *Rolling Stone* 2016 (*The Sopranos* again #1)

14 Emmy Awards

7 Golden Globes

Its final episode, "***Goodbye, Farewell and Amen***" was the **highest rated TV show in the U.S. history until finally surpassed by the 2010 Super Bowl** and is still the highest rated scripted show ever!! (Followed by the finale of *Roots*.)

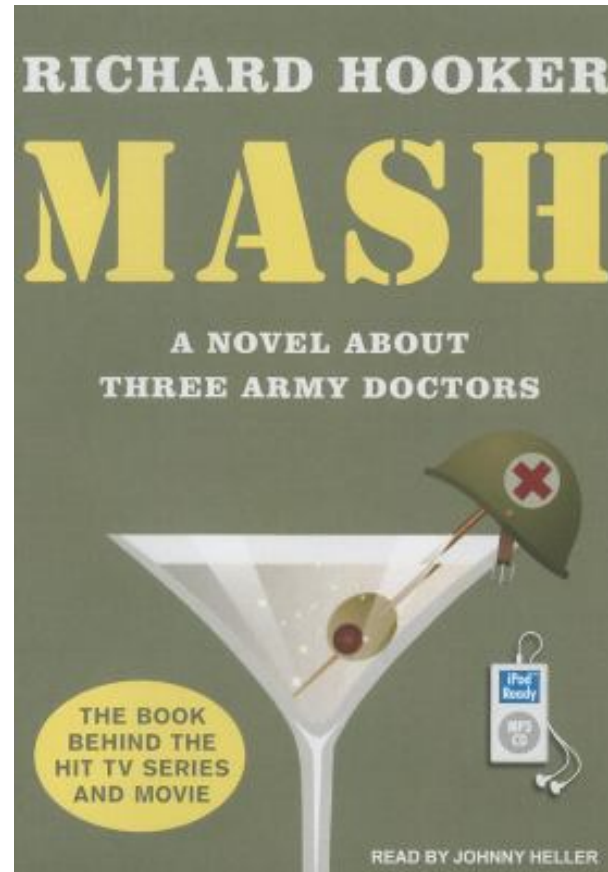
**M\*A\*S\*H** (1972-84)  
*“Suicide is painless”*



*Frank Burns, Hawkeye Pierce, Trapper John, Radar O'Reilly, Max Klinger  
Margaret Houlihan, Henry Blake, Father Mulcahy*



**Dr. Richard Hornberger Jr.**



Except for Frank Burns, the doctors were still extremely competent and fierce advocates for their patients. Although a tragicomedy, the laugh track did not run during surgery.

## *St. Elsewhere* 1982-88

*“Will this chaos will end.” “This chaos will end.” “I don't believe you”*



Taking its name from Samuel Shem's *House of God*, it brought that book's hospital chaos to TV.

*St. Elsewhere* aimed to “demystify doctors”. No longer God-like, they abused drugs, committed adultery, were shot by patients. Mark Harmon's Dr. Bobby Caldwell even died of AIDS from unprotected sex.



ER

1994-2009

***“It's not a good idea to shock a patient who's wide-awake.”***



***ER*** was created by Michael Crichton, who wrote the ***Andromeda Strain*** while at **Harvard Medical School** and later wrote ***Jurassic Park***. Until ***Grey's Anatomy***, it was the longest running medical show on TV. It captured the frenetic pace of a big city ER and was committed to medical accuracy:

***"We'd bend the rules but never break them. A medication that would take 10 minutes to work might take 30 seconds instead. We compressed time. A 12- to 24-hour shift gets pushed into 48 minutes."***

***"It's like M\*A\*S\*H with just the helicopters showing up and no laughs. E.R. is all trauma; you never get to know enough about the patients or get involved with them. It's just treat, release and move on"***.

***"Probably the most realistic fictional treatment of the medical profession TV has ever presented"***.

Pfau **“The Influence of Television Viewing on Public Perceptions of Physicians”**  
Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 1995)

Physicians seen as more caring, friendly, poised, calm, attractive, sexy vs reality . More wealthy, strong, and high status, but less moral, proper, unselfish, and honest than reality

***“Television images prevail even in the face of direct experience and meld with direct experience ..... a melding of fiction and reality”***

Diem S et al. N Engl J Med 1996

***“The portrayal of CPR on TV may lead the viewing public to have an unrealistic impression of CPR and its chances for success.”***

ML. Vanderford, "Television and Human Values: A Case Study of 'ER' and Moral Ambiguity," In Religious Values at the Threshold of the Third Millennium, ed. FA. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1999)

***"The show lies heavily on moral ambiguity and realism, rather than the idealism and certainty of past doctor shows. ER challenges some of the values taught by other television programs and reinforces progressive distrust of hierarchy. . . .The program also discourages beliefs in moral certainty."***

O'Connor M Role of the TV Drama ER in Medical Student Life: Entertainment or Socialization JAMA 280: 854 , 1998

***“More intent than a textbook, ER captivates students ...”***

***“More than a two-fold increase in 4<sup>th</sup> year student ... ER residency since ER’s premier”***

***“Total time a student could spend watching ER weekly over 4 years rivals the time of a typical emergency room rotation at most schools.”***

***“Depictions of of the controlling attending, arrogant surgeon, or blundering medical student on ER force students to confront their own preconceptions.”***

## Scrubs 2001-10

*“Never promise a patient they're gonna be fine. God hates doctors.”*

More than any show **Scrubs** captured the sarcastic, black humor of ***The House of God*** with fantasy scenes, scatological humor, sex jokes, and dancing. But both critics and real doctors understood that beneath all the silliness it expressed the internal hope and fears of doctors in training.



[Weiss J. Scrubs. https://slate.com/culture/2009/05/the-most-accurate-television-show-about-the-medical-profession-scrubs.html](https://slate.com/culture/2009/05/the-most-accurate-television-show-about-the-medical-profession-scrubs.html)

***"Residents often feel like they know nothing, yet they're suddenly invested with huge amounts of responsibility, expected to give orders to much-more-experienced nurses, required to make quick decisions with life-or-death consequences."***

***"He says exactly what a resident feels, day in or day out. 'Am I hurting the patient? Am I learning what I should? Am I kissing up too much to the attending?"***

## *Grey's Anatomy* 2005-now

***“Don’t let what he wants eclipse what you need. He’s very dreamy but he’s not the sun. You are.”***



Its creator, Shonda Rhymes, said it’s “***a relationship show with surgery in it***”. For its ensemble of surgical residents sex with each other, attendings, and even patients was a priority.

Rhymes also created ***Scandal, Private Practice*** and produced ***How to Get Away with Murder, and The Catch***.

***Grey's*** has passed ***ER*** as the longest running doctor show and TV.



Quick B “The Effects of Viewing Grey’s Anatomy on Perceptions of Doctors and Patient Satisfaction,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 53 (2009)

**Survey of 269 students: the more they watched the show, the more realistic they thought it was; the more realistic they thought it was, the more likely they were to perceive actual physicians as brave, heroic, clever or brilliant.**

***Cosmopolitan Magazine (2014) A Definitive Ranking of 46 "Grey's Anatomy" Couples***

***“We created this because so many characters have had sex (and fallen in love!) on this show”***

***“Meredith and Derek make us believe screwed-up people have a chance.”***

## House 2004-12

***“But what do I know, I am only the doctor”***



***“Treating illnesses is why we became doctors. Treating patients is what makes most doctors miserable.”***

***“ You have the Rubik’s complex. You need to solve the puzzle.”***

Strauman E Evolution of the TV Doctor-Hero J Med Humanit (2011) 3

***“Dr. Gregory House is a utilitarian, arrogant man, addicted to drugs but a hero because he “GETS IT RIGHT!” He breaks rules only to “win” the game or solve the puzzle.”***

Czarny M et al Bioethics and professionalism in popular television medical dramas J Med Ethics 2010;36:203-206

Reviewed 50 episodes of *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*

28/49 patient consents were poorly obtained.

18/22 departures from standard practice endangered the patient.

4/8 patient-refusals of treatment were ignored.

Only 9/178 of professional and 60/218 of patient incidents were exemplary.

40 episodes of sexual relationship between attending and intern.

Chory-Assad R et al. TV Doctors (2001) J Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 45:3, 499-521,

***“Increased exposure to prime-time fiction programs featuring physicians as main characters was associated with perceiving doctors as more uncaring, cold, unfriendly, nervous, tense, and anxious.”***

***“Were often mean, unethical, incompetent, insubordinate, and sometimes even criminal”***

***“There are many instances, especially in House, of physicians performing procedures without any attempt to solicit consent and still others of physicians lying to patients in order to obtain ‘consent’.”***

# Women Physicians on TV

***Ben Casey:*** “*Why did you become a doctor? I don’t much care for female MDs –they’re too unstable*”

***ER’s*** “*Dr. Cary Weaver is an excellent doctor, but is bossy and demanding.*”

***Grey’s Anatomy:*** “*Sure, the soap opera-like antics of the women’s personal lives often overshadow the actual practicing of medicine, but, who am I kidding, their soap opera-like antics are the best part!*”

***The X Files’*** rational ***Dr. Dana Scully*** vs. paranoid ***Agent Fox Muldaur*** countered the stereotype of the hysterical woman.

***Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*** had to be named “Mike” and move to the Old West from Boston

“The medical profession no longer has a generous supply of eager, young Dr. Kildares. Today, physicians are likely to be female, foreign born, and over 55.”

## Nurses and Other Health Professionals?

***The Nurses***, 1961, paired a young nurse with an experienced one. It did poorly in the ratings when scheduled opposite ***Dr. Kildare***, was panned by critics, and ended after a brief try as ***The Doctors and the Nurses***

***The Eleventh Hour***, 1962 about mental illness, by the producers of Dr. Kildare. Rivalry between psychiatrists and psychologists badly damaged the show.

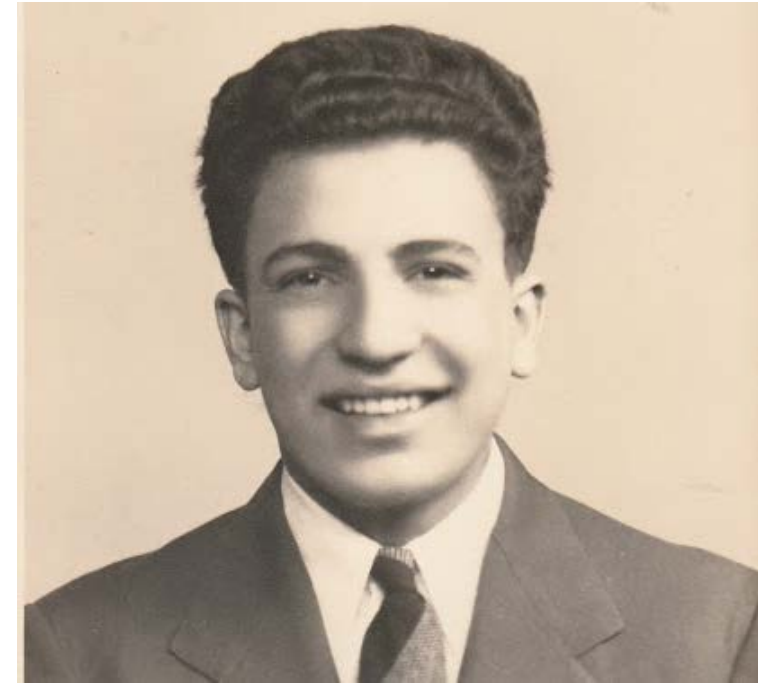
***Julia*** was 1968 sitcom about a young, widowed nurse. Diahann Carroll played the first non-servant African American lead character in TV history.

***Nurse Jackie*** Edie Falco's drug addicted, cynical but excellent ER nurse. President National Federation of Nurses ***"I found the things , she did – stealing, throwing away body parts - extremely insulting."***

## *Ben Casey*

I was high school student when *Ben Casey* debuted. Vince Edwards (born **Vincent Zoine**) was an Italian American actor

My uncle was an Italian American doctor I thought looked like Edwards.



My uncle was diagnosed with ependymoma in medical school. I was with him when he died age 32.

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Strauman et al *The Doctor(s) in House: An Analysis of the Evolution of the Television Doctor-Hero* *J Med Humanit* (2011) 32:31–46

M. Pfau et al "The Influence of Television Viewing on Public Perceptions of Physicians," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 39 (1995).

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