



News Release

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TV Medical Dramas Address Health Policy Issues, New Study Finds *Impact on Public Attitudes Debated at Forum*

Washington, D.C. -- TV's popular hospital dramas are regularly addressing such important national health policy issues as patient's rights, managed care, the right to die, and racial disparities in health care, according to a new study of the 2000-2001 television season released today by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. At the same time, the study found that many of the most hotly debated national health policy issues such as prescription drug coverage for the elderly or coverage of the uninsured are not featured on these fictional shows.

The findings will be discussed at a forum today in Washington, D.C. entitled *John Q Goes to Washington: Health Policy Issues in Popular Culture* to explore the role of entertainment media in shaping public attitudes and priorities on health policy issues. Representatives from Hollywood, including the screenwriter of the movie *John Q* and the medical supervisor of "ER" and "Third Watch", will join members of the health policy community for the forum.

According to the study -- entitled *As Seen on TV: Health Policy Issues in TV's Medical Dramas* -- these programs feature an average of one scene per episode that discusses a public policy on health care. Examples include a debate over whether it is legal to distribute clean needles to drug addicts on the NBC drama *ER*; an episode of the popular Lifetime show *Strong Medicine* in which a critically ill low-income patient doesn't have access to the prescription drugs she needs because her inner city neighborhood isn't adequately served by the major pharmacies; a story about a woman whose leukemia was misdiagnosed by her over-worked and possibly careless HMO doctor on the now-cancelled ABC drama *Gideon's Crossing*; and an *ER* episode in which an HMO won't allow a woman with terminal breast cancer to be admitted to the hospital for pain management.

"Fictional TV shows reach a much wider audience than most news programs, and in many ways they can be even more powerful," said Vicky Rideout, a vice president of the Foundation who oversaw the study. "Instead of bill numbers and budget figures, health policy issues are portrayed through the lives of characters the viewer cares about, often in life or death situations."

Overall, the study found the shows did not tilt either for or against the status quo in their depictions of these public policy issues. About half of all scenes (48%) presented both sides of the issue in an even-handed manner, while the rest were split between scenes that seemed to come out against the status quo policy (26%) and those that appeared to favor current policy (26%).

The shows frequently referenced many of the leading institutional players in health policy debates, such as hospital administrators, lawyers, government agencies, insurance companies and HMOs. Of these, the only

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ones portrayed more negatively than positively were insurance companies, lawyers and HMOs (all six references to HMOs over the season were negative).

“While HMOs aren’t referenced very often, whenever they are mentioned they’re still the bad guys as far as TV is concerned,” Ms. Rideout commented.

A related survey also released by the Kaiser Family Foundation today found that four in ten adults surveyed (44%) said they had heard about the movie *John Q*, in which a young boy can’t get the heart transplant he needs to survive because his insurance policy doesn’t cover it and the hospital demands a \$75,000 cash payment in advance. Among those who had heard of the movie, more than seven in ten said they believe insurers refuse to pay for treatments like those in the movie: 42% think it happens “a lot” and 30% “sometimes.”

The movie *John Q* is being released today on video and DVD. It was seen in theatres by an estimated 12-15 million viewers, earning more than \$70 million in domestic box office receipts. Next year several new medical dramas are expected in the fall lineup, including *Presidio Med* on CBS (from the executive producer of *ER*, John Wells) and *Meds* on ABC, about two “renegade doctors” who are trying to take on the HMOs. *ER* and *Scrubs* (a hospital-based comedy) will both return to NBC in the fall. In May, the Showtime Network premiered the movie *Damaged Care*, a fictional movie that profiled a real-life managed care executive who went on to become an “outspoken critic” of the industry.

John Q Goes to Washington: Health Policy Issues in Popular Culture

**Tuesday, July 16, 9:00 a.m. – noon
National Press Club, Holeman Lounge
Washington, D.C.**

James Kearns, screenwriter, *John Q*
Mark Morocco, medical supervisor, *ER* and *Third Watch*
Joseph Turow, professor, University of Pennsylvania
Karen Ignagni, president, American Association of Health Plans
Ronald Pollack, executive director, Families USA

*A webcast of the panel discussion will be available after 2:00 PM ET the day of the event at
<http://www.kaisernet.org/healthcast/kff/16jul02>.*

Methodology: *As Seen on TV: Health Policy Issues in TV’s Medical Dramas* was conducted for the Foundation by University of Pennsylvania Professor Joseph Turow and doctoral student Rachel Gans, in consultation with Foundation staff. The study analyzed every episode of the four hospital dramas on the air during the 2000-2001 television season: *ER*, *City of Angels*, *Gideon’s Crossing* and *Strong Medicine*. A total of 75 hour-long episodes were examined for the study. Health policy issues are defined as debates about government or institutional laws or policies about non-clinical issues in health care; public policy issues are those that concern government policies only. A detailed methodology is available in the full report of the study, which can be found online at www.kff.org. The survey *Response to the Movie John Q* was conducted as part of the Foundation’s ongoing Health News Interest Index series. It is a nationally representative, random dial telephone survey of 1201 adults 18 years and older. The survey was designed and analyzed by Foundation staff; fieldwork was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates from May 31-June 3, 2002. The margin of error is +/- 3%.

Copies of the executive summary (#3232), full report (#3231), ER survey snapshot (#3230), and John Q survey snapshot (#3245) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's web site at www.kff.org or by calling the Foundation's Publication Request Line at 1-800-656-4533. Copies of the John Q survey topline (#3246) are only available on the Foundation’s web site.

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