

What happened on Grey's Anatomy last night? Teaching medicine and medical ethics using popular culture

Why students opt to pursue medicine as a career has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Historically, theorists like G. S. Becker (1962) and Bernard Lentz and David Laband (1989) have attributed many cases to 'human capital formation' within the family unit. To summarise Lentz and Laband's argument, the children of doctors experience an intergenerational transfer of career-specific human capital that a) motivates them to voluntarily pursue a career in medicine, and b) better prepares them for pursuing this course of study. While it may still be true that there are a disproportionate number of doctors' children successfully applying to medical school in the 21st century, as in the 20th, the purpose of this seminar is to engage with other motivating factors that inspire students to enrol in medicine and allied health degrees. Specifically, we are interested in exploring the impact of popular culture on the perception of medical studies and careers, and whether this too may motivate and prepare future doctors and allied health professionals.

It is known that medical and nursing students watch medical television dramas and comedies. One study from John Hopkins University cites 84% of medical students and 81% of nursing students (n=849) reported watching medical television dramas (Czarny et al. 2008). A repeat of this study was done in Australia in 2011 in which 93.7% of medical students reported watching medical dramas (Weaver and Wilson, 2011). Among the shows specifically mentioned in these studies were Grey's Anatomy, House M.D., Scrubs and E.R. If accepting that a parent can serve as a role model for a future doctor, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that a fictional character may function as a substitute role model for students who do not have doctors or health professionals in their families. This seminar explores the relationship between healthcare career aspirations and consumption of medically-focused popular culture within this cohort. Further, the above data indicates that incorporating popular culture references into medical and health education is likely to increase student engagement and represents a source of untapped potential for effective communication of medical information from lecturers to students and, further downstream, from doctors to patients. Medical teaching facilities engaging with this form of education have reported consistently positive results (from students and tutors) indicating the significant potential this mode of teaching has for enhancing student learning (Glasser et al., 2001).

This seminar will model an interdisciplinary approach to the use of popular culture in medical education, viewing some scenes from popular medical dramas and opening a discussion of the ways in which they address medical and ethical issues. Theories will be discussed for how 'medicine' became so popular and why doctors appeared in fictional films before criminals, clergy and cowboys (Glasser, 2010). Audience participation will be encouraged throughout with the goal of building confidence in interdisciplinary teaching modes. Both seminar leaders are members of Monash's Medical Education Research and Quality unit (MERQ) and have extensive experience in classroom teaching, specialising in the design and use of activity-based learning.