

Doctors in TV fiction

Charo Lacalle

- *The hyperrealism of contemporary medical dramas (House, Grey's Anatomy, Hospital Central, etc.) and their appeal for viewers lead to controversial reactions in the health sector. So, therefore, while the Collegial Medical Organisation (OMC in Spanish) believes that hospital fiction encourages patients to ask their doctors for inexistent or ineffective treatments, the Spanish Neurology Society (SEN in Spanish) highlights their role in health education. A look at the North American programmes since the first medical series premiered in 1951 provides us with privileged insight into the construction of archetypes and the impact of current productions among audiences.*

Keywords

Medical fiction, United States, Spain, health organisations, television, effects, public opinion.

A report by the Central Deontology Committee of the Collegial Medical Organisation (OMC) concerning the image of doctors and health personnel in TV fiction, published 17 January 2008¹, led public opinion to debate the effects of a genre which, in recent years in Spain, has combined high audience figures with an enthusiastic welcome by critics. Medical dramas as popular as the North American *House* and *Grey's Anatomy* (broadcast in Spain on Cuatro since 2006) and Telecinco's series *Hospital Central* (broadcast since 2000) amply illustrate the pedagogical nature of audiovisual narrative, the role in health education recognised by the Spanish Neurology Society (SEN).² But the hyperrealism of how medical life is represented and the social impact caused among viewers by this kind of programme have raised many doubts among medical experts concerning the prominence of sensationalism and the legitimacy of the inextricable fusion between reality and fiction.

In this report, the Collegial Medical Organisation regrets the fact that medical series encourage false expectations among patients, who flood surgeries demanding unnecessary or even inexistent treatments from their doctors. The OMC also denounced the frivolity of the health-related characters constructed by fiction that lean much more towards their romantic relations than their work, and alerted people to the false expectations that a distorted image of the medical profession might arouse in future students of medicine.

1 <http://www.cgcom.org/notas_prensa/2008/08_01_17_tv.html> [Consulted 14 April 2008].

2 <<http://www.europapress.es/ocio/tv-00127/noticia-house-urgencias-aumentan-conocimiento-medico-televidentes-rigor-cientifico-20080422194912.html>> [Consulted 23 April 2008].

Charo Lacalle

*Professor at the Journalism Department
of the Autonomous University of Barcelona*

From the broadcasting industry, the production house Videomedia (responsible for *Hospital Central* and *MIR*) replied to the OMC reminding them of the different campaigns carried out via the long-running Telecinco programme *Hospital Central* (blood donation, use of contraceptives, international aid, etc.), also insisting that medical fiction cannot limit itself to portraying reality per se. An opinion also shared by Juan Algarra, A&E doctor at the Hospital Clínic in Madrid and script advisor for *Hospital Central*.³ Moreover, representatives from Videomedia reminded the OMC of the constant interaction between this series and the emergency services of the Community of Madrid, claiming that they have always counted on the collaboration of experts and institutions.⁴ But fiction is not the only macro-genre to arouse criticism from the OMC. Just a few months earlier, the Collegial Medical Organisation gave a warning to the programme on Antena 3 TV *Cambio radical* (2007) because it offered its contestants physical transformations via plastic surgery, defining the programme as a show that did not sufficiently respect people's dignity. This criticism was repeated by associations of TV viewers and feminist organisations, which also considered the reality show to be openly "chauvinistic".⁵

Since the start of the fifties, the debate on how health is represented in TV fiction has been constant in the United States. The wide range of programmes starring medical staff (69 to date) contains some of the most important milestones in world television, such as *Dr. Kildare*, *Quincy*, *E.R.*, *House* and *Grey's Anatomy*, just to name a few examples.⁶ As in other areas of television, the North American experience can act as an observatory to help us understand the complex relations between what becomes

sensational and what becomes social, the two feeding back both on representation and reality. That is why, on the following pages, we will take a brief look at the genres and formats that have gradually shaped viewers' collective imaginary concerning medical staff in order to determine the axiological, thematic and structural elements that go to make up the narrative universe of present-day hospital productions.

In order to explain North American medical fiction to the reader (of which 15 programmes we have been able to see on Spanish television and 4 on the Catalan station, TV3), figure 1 provides a list of all the programmes broadcast since the first hospital drama premiered in 1951 up to the present day. For reasons of space, productions focusing on nurses have not been included, although they have also been well represented in the history of North American TV fiction since the premiere of the serial *The nurses* on CBS in 1962.⁷

The early days

The first cinematographic medical drama dates back to 1937. *Internes Can't Take Money*, a film by Alfred Santell starring Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea in the role of Doctor Kildare. The character of Kildare later inspired 15 films, seven books, various short stories published in magazines, a radio series, a TV series and an avalanche of merchandising (toys, lunchboxes, tee shirts, etc.), as well as a conspicuous controversy among those who adored the character and those who criticised how the doctor's role in society came second to his personal life.

The script for *Internes Can't Take Money*, by the prolific

3 *El País*, 19 January 2008.

4 <<http://www.diariocordoba.com/noticias/noticia.asp?pkid=377532>> [Consulted 14 April 2008]. The Spanish Neurology Society also advises *Hospital Central*.

5 *El País*, 31 March 2007

6 Apart from British productions (17 to date), health fiction is an area that is not widely practised in Europe, where there are only two programmes that can be classified as actual hits: the series *Hospital Central* (Telecinco, 2000) and the German series *In aller Freundschaft* (ARD, 1998).

7 The poor ratings for *The nurses* led its producers to include doctors in the cast for the second season, and they even changed the name to *The nurses and the doctors*.

Table 1. North American medical fiction programmes (I)

Programme	Channel	Genre	Format	Episodes*	Duration
<i>City Hospital</i> (1951-1952)	CBS	Drama	Series	9	30
<i>The Doctor</i> (1952-1953)	NBC	Drama	Anthology	43	30
<i>Medic</i> (1954-1956)	NBC	Drama	Series	58	30
<i>King's Row</i> (1955-1956)	ABC	Drama	Anthology	7	60
<i>Donna Reed Show</i> (1958-1966)	ABC	Comedy	Series	275	30
<i>Hennesey</i> (1959-1962)	CBS	Comedy	Series	96	30
<i>Diagnosis: Unknown</i> (1960)	CBS	Drama	Series	9	60
<i>Ben Casey</i> (1961-1966)	ABC	Drama	Series	153	60
<i>Dr. Kildare</i> (1961-1966) (Doctor Kildare, TVE, 1964)	NBC	Drama	Series	191	60
<i>The Eleventh Hour</i> (1962-1963)	NBC	Drama	Series	62	60
<i>Breaking Point</i> (1963)	ABC	Drama	Series	30	60
<i>The Bold Ones: The Doctors</i> (1963-1982)	NBC	Drama	Serial	5.182	30
<i>General Hospital</i> (1963)	ABC	Drama	Serial	11.546	30
<i>Medical Center</i> (1969-1976) (Centro Médico, TVE, 1971)	CBS	Drama	Series	170	60
<i>Marcus Welby M. D.</i> (1969-1976) (Marcus Welby doctor en medicina, TVE, 1971)	ABC	Drama	Series	169	60
<i>The Bold Ones: The New Doctors</i> (1969-1973)	NBC	Drama	Series	45	60
<i>Matt Lincoln</i> (1970-1971)	ABC	Drama	Series	16	60
<i>The Interns</i> (1970-1971)	CBS	Drama	Series	24	60
<i>The Psychiatrist</i> (1971)	NBC	Drama	Series	6	60
<i>Temperatures Rising</i> (1972-1974)	ABC	Comedy	Series	46	36
<i>Emergency!</i> (1972-1979)	NBC	Drama	Series	124	60
<i>M.A.S.H.</i> (1972-1983) (M.A.S.H., TVE, 1983)	CBS	<i>Dramedy</i>	Series	256	25
<i>Doc</i> (1973)	CBS	Comedy	Series	31	30
<i>Doc Eliot</i> (1973)	ABC	Drama	Series	14	60
<i>Bob Crane Show</i> (1975)	NBC	Comedy	Series	14	30
<i>Medical Store</i> (1975-1976)	NBC	Drama	Series	11	60
<i>Doctor's Hospital</i> (1975-1976)	NBC	Drama	Series	9	60
<i>Quincy M. E.</i> (1976-1983) (Quincy, TVE, 1977)	NBC	Drama	Series	148	60
<i>Code R</i> (1977)	CBS	Drama	Series	13	60
<i>Rafferty</i> (1977)	CBS	Drama	Series	13	60
<i>Westside Medical</i> (1977)	ABC	Drama	Series	13	60
<i>The Lazarus Síndrome</i> (1979)	ABC	Drama	Series	4	60
<i>House Calls</i> (1979-1982)	CBS	Comedy	Series	57	30
<i>Trapper John</i> (1979-1986)	CBS	Drama	Series	150	60

Source: author.

* The number of episodes or chapters of programmes currently being broadcast is shown up to May 2008.

Table 1. North American medical fiction programmes (II)

Programme	Channel	Genre	Format	Episodes*	Duration
<i>St. Elsewhere</i> (1982-1988) (A cor obert, TV3, 1986)	NBC	Drama	Series	137	60
<i>Chicago Story</i> (1982)	NBC	Drama	Series	13	90
<i>Cutter to Houston</i> (1983)	CBS	Drama	Series	9	60
<i>E/R</i> (1984-1985)	CBS	Comedy	Series	22	30
<i>Buck James</i> (1987-1988)	ABC	Drama	Series	28	60
<i>Island Son</i> (1989-1990)	CBS	Drama	Series	18	60
<i>Doogie Howser M. D.</i> (1989-1993) (Un médico precoz, TVE-1, 1993)	ABC	<i>Dramedy</i>	Series	97	25
<i>Doctor Doctor</i> (1989-1991)	CBS	Comedy	Series	41	30
<i>H.E.L.P.</i> (1990)	ABC	Drama	Series	2	60
<i>Lifestories</i> (1990-1991)	NBC	Drama	Anthology	10	45
<i>Northern Exposure</i> (1990-1995) (Doctor en Alaska, La 2, 1993)	CBS	<i>Dramedy</i>	Series	110	45
<i>Chicago Hope</i> (1994-2000) (Chicago Hope, Antena 3 TV, 1999)	CBS	Drama	Series	141	60
<i>E.R.</i> (1994-) (Urgencias, TVE-1, 1999)	NBC	Drama	Series	303	60
<i>Port Charles</i> (1997-2003)	ABC	Drama	Serial	1.458	30
<i>L.A. Doctors</i> (1998-1999)	CBS	Drama	Series	24	60
<i>Strange World</i> (1999-2000)	ABC	Drama	Series	13	60
<i>Providence</i> (1999-2002) (Providence, TV3, 2001)	NBC	Drama	Series	96	60
<i>Third Watch</i> (1999-2005)	NBC	Drama	Series	132	42
<i>Gideon's Crossing</i> (2000-2001)	ABC	Drama	Series	20	60
<i>City of Angels</i> (2000)	CBS	Drama	Series	24	60
<i>Strong Medicine</i> (2000-2006) (Doctores de Filadèlfia, TV3, 2002)	Life	Drama	Series	132	60
<i>Nip/Tuck</i> (2000-) (Nip/Tuck, TV3, 2005)	FX	Drama	Series	73	60
<i>Scrubs</i> (2001) (Scrubs, Canal +, 2005; Cuatro, 2007)	NBC	Comedy	Series	146	22
<i>Doc</i> (2001-2004) (El doctor, TV3, 2002)	ION TV	Drama	Series	88	60
<i>Presidio Med</i> (2002-2003)	CBS	Drama	Series	14	60
<i>Kingdom Hospital</i> (2004)	ABC	Drama	Series	13	45
<i>Medical Investigation</i> (2004-2005) (Medical Investigation, Telecinco, 2005)	NBC	Drama	Series	20	45
<i>House</i> (2004-) (House, Cuatro, 2006)	FOX	Drama	Series	86	60
<i>Grey's Anatomy</i> (2004-) (Anatomía de Grey, Cuatro, 2006)	ABC	Drama	Series	74	60
<i>Inconceivable</i> (2005)	NBC	Drama	Series	10	60
<i>3 lbs</i> (2006-)	CBS	Drama	Series	8	60
<i>Saved</i> (2006)	TNT	Drama	Series	14	60
<i>Heartland</i> (2007-)	TNT	Drama	Series	9	60
<i>General Hospital: Night Shift</i> (2007-)	SOAPnet	Drama	Serial	13	60
<i>Private practice</i> (2007-) (Sin cita previa, Fox España 2007)	FOX	Drama	Series	9	60

Source: author.

* The number of episodes or chapters of programmes currently being broadcast is shown up to May 2008.

writer and scriptwriter Max Brand (known as Frederick Schiller Faust), was made up of different stories inspired by a well-known urologist in New York, Dr. George Winthrop Fish (1895-1977) who, according to Faust, fitted to perfection how doctors were represented in film: he was very attractive, he was very good with people and his immaculate curriculum was exempt from those human errors and social deficiencies that the doctors starring in other professional dramas would gradually take on. In fact, the film about Kildare contained a good dose of action unrelated to health issues, as it centred on what happened to the doctor when he attempted to rescue the daughter of a widow with whom he had fallen in love.

The NBC series that was inspired by the character of Kildare (*Dr. Kildare*, 1961-1966) was not, however, the first medical drama on television. The pioneer, *City Hospital*, started on CBS in 1951 and starred a married couple who were both doctors, modifying the cinematographic representation of the first doctor in audiovisual fiction. Before adapting *Internes Can't Take Money* for television, NBC counter-attacked its rival with *Medic* (1952-1953), a story that had a lot in common with CBS's *City Hospital* but mostly structured around the emotional implications resulting from medical cases.

The obsession of *Medic's* creator (James Moser) to get the highest possible level of realism, led him to ask for the support of the Los Angeles County Medical Association (LACMA), at that time interested in raising public awareness of the need to invest in new medical technologies in hospitals. The success of *Medic*, backed by the widespread conviction among health professionals that the dissemination of medical knowledge would make patients feel more secure, was sometimes tarnished by the successive attacks of Catholic organisations against the public exhibition of issues such as giving birth or sexually transmitted diseases.

The initial idyll between the LACMA and *Medic* was the start of a long relationship in which their mutual readiness was often affected by the echo of disputes between health institutions and the producers. In fact, the successive restrictions introduced by NBC to the realism of *Medic*, under pressure from the LACMA, led Moser to change to ABC, where he forged one of the biggest successes of the sixties, *Ben Casey* (1961-1966), based on surplus material from his first medical series. This new series adapted one of the

narrative motifs of the police genre, the professional couple, contrasting the impetuosity and capacity to improvise of the young Dr. Casey with the composure and much more orthodox methods of his mentor, Dr. Zorba. NBC responded to *Ben Casey* with *Dr. Kildare* (1961-1966), the first medical drama to be seen in Spain on TVE as from 1964. The TV Kildare was an updated version of the film character of the same name who, like the young Casey, shared star status with another veteran doctor, called Leonard Gillespie.

In spite of the uncountable similarities between both series, there were also differences, determined in part by the expectations of the respective channels regarding their target audience. So while *Ben Casey* dedicated a lot more attention to hospital issues than *Dr. Kildare*, the star of the latter (played by a very young Richard Chamberlain) lavished his great appeal on the more personal facet of the numerous plots, which took precedence over the medical stories. So while Kildare enthralled a female audience aged between 15 and 30, those over 31 adored Casey.

Both *Ben Casey* and *Dr. Kildare* contained all the narrative stereotypes in fashion at the start of the sixties. But, unlike any other subgenre of TV fiction, both series became the epicentre of controversy concerning the representation of health professionals in TV fiction. For this reason, as the Advisory Committee of the American Medical Association (AMA), which on this occasion advised both series, increased its criticism of the great licence taken in their representations, both *Dr. Kildare* and *Ben Casey* made an effort to highlight the social and medical issues of the different stories and to portray scientific innovations with more emphasis.

The exhaustion of both medical series, after six seasons of intensive broadcasting, led to a kind of exhaustion of hospital drama, which also largely tinted the success of other ambitious productions of the period, such as *The Eleventh Hour* (NBC, 1962-1963), a series about a young psychologist who worked with psychiatrists, and *Breaking Point* (ABC, 1963), a kind of sequel to *Ben Casey* structured around two psychiatrists whose patients were not mentally ill but had reached a "breaking point" in their lives. Consequently, although the medical comedies *Donna Reed Show* (ABC 1958-1966) and *Hennessey* (CBS, 1959-1962) got reasonable audience ratings, the networks decided to explore other formats and looked to anthology and series to

provide them with the suitable support to diversify.

The anthology *The Bold Ones: The Doctors* (NBC, 1963-1982) was initially made up entirely of self-contained episodes on medical emergencies but a little later adopted the serialisation that was bringing such good results for *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963). This production, which had the popular Doctor Gregory House among its loyal fans, constitutes one of the longest running soap operas on North American television, with more than 11,546 episodes broadcast up to 30 April 2008.⁸

In spite of the success of both serials, the series that would place medical fiction in the epicentre of public opinion would be *Marcus Welby MD* (ABC, 1969-1976) and *Medical Center* (CBS, 1969-1976), two giants that were also broadcast by TVE from 1971.

Medical Center, set in the university hospital of Los Angeles, once again took up the happy rivalry of earlier programmes between inexperience and experience but inverted this relationship, contrasting the conventionalism of the very young Doctor Gannon with the medial heterodoxy of the compassionate and mature Doctor Lochner, although the two's friendship systematically prevailed over their many discrepancies. Notwithstanding this, although Marcus Welby also contrasted medical orthodoxy associated with youth (embodied by Doctor Kiley) with the lesser conventionalism in the methods used by the older doctor (Doctor Welby) to cure patients, ABC made Doctor Welby the main star of the new production. Moreover, Welby wasn't a surgeon but a GP, who combined human warmth with great skill in diagnosing rare illnesses. This quality would be surpassed many years later by the controversial House.

Given the restraint of *Medical Center*, not only did *Marcus Welby* have to quarrel occasionally with the AMA and the American Board of Family Practice (generally less incisive

than the AMA), but it also had to suffer harsh attacks on the part of organisations that, like the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation nowadays, denounced the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and generalisations (in this case, concerning the association between homosexuality and pederasty). In short, there were evident signs that times were changing, as well as the relations between television and society, also highlighted by the introduction of a Hispanic nurse-secretary (the character of Consuelo López) in *Marcus Welby*.

Following the footprints of *Marcus Welby*, *The Interns* (CBS, 1970-1971) and *Matt Lincoln* (ABC, 1970-1971) attempted to balance escapism with reality; social portrayals with family comfort, in order to be able to fit into the convulsive North American society of the sixties, while *The Bold Ones: The New Doctors* (NBC-1973), much more along the lines of *Medical Center* than the previous two, dodged the numerous obstacles resulting from the synthesis between conventionalism and innovation by introducing themes in line with the demands of the time and once again highlighting medical technology.⁹ On the other hand, the decline of the AMA in the most rebellious period in the history of the USA gradually released producers from institutional pressure and prepared the ground for new fictional representations of medical practice in line with the development that would be undergone by both professional dramas and police series on television as from the seventies.

M.A.S.H. (CBS, 1972-1983), a black comedy set in the Korean War and resulting from an adaptation of the film of the same name directed by Robert Altman in 1970,¹⁰ reflected the disenchantment of post-Kennedyism, embodied in United States' disastrous involvement in the Vietnam War. Although CBS's comedy represents a case apart in the history of North American medical fiction, the series became

8 *General Hospital* has two sequels, the serials *Port Charles* (ABC, 1997-2003) and the recent *General Hospital: Night Shift* (Soap, 2007-), which has revived the initial formula given the success of *Grey's Anatomy* and of *CSI: Las Vegas* (both set in the night shift).

9 Unlike the serial of 1963 *The Bold Ones: The Doctors*, *The Bold Ones: The New Doctors* was a rotating series within a container (*The Bold Ones*) that alternated with the broadcasting of another three series: *The Protector*, *The Lawyers* and *The Senator*.

10 In fact, although the similarities between the film and the series are notable, the producers of the TV adaptation avoided the film's copyright by claiming that they had been inspired by the novel *MASH* by Richard Hooker, a doctor and writer of several of the scripts for the CBS series produced in 1969. Hooker also took part in another medical series for CBS, *Trapper John M. D.* (1979-1986).

a veritable TV institution, the legacy of which, inter-generational and timeless, would logically be more visible in the subsequent evolution of medical fiction; especially in the construction of such unrestrained characters as Doctor Greene in *E.R.* or such eccentric characters as House. *M.A.S.H.* arrived on TVE in 1983, after CBS had ended its broadcasts.

Coinciding with the start of the first paramedic programme of *Los Angeles County Fire Department* (LACoFD), the NBC brought out *Emergency!* (NBC, 1972-1979), a series that combined the skills of doctors, firemen and health professionals and thereby started up a new seam that could be mined, whose ultimate exponent would be *Third Watch* (CBS, 1999-2005). Notwithstanding this, doctors would not get truly close to policemen until *Quincy M.E.* (NBC, 1976-1983), which for the first time made a forensic scientist into the star of a medical drama. Quincy was a kind of medical Colombo, whose marked vocation and freedom provided by his profession systematically brought him up against both the police and his own boss. The series (which came to TVE in 1977) was broadcast in rotation with other programmes such as *Colombo*, *McMillan* and *McCloud* and, although the police element was gradually lost, Quincy is a direct ancestor of the forensic scientists portrayed in contemporary action series (*CSI*, *Without a Trace*, *Criminal Minds*, etc.).

The era of realism

St. Elsewhere (NBC, 1982-1988) contained the association between medical themes and intrigue that both *E.R.* and *Quincy* had bestowed on hospital drama, but this was reproduced based on the new police paradigm installed one year before by *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), the

series that renovated TV fictional drama at all levels. As happened with the police on *Hill Street Blues*, the doctors in *St. Elsewhere* were characterised as heroes-victims and, for the first time in the history of medical drama, the problems came much more frequently from the doctors themselves than from the patients. The enthusiasm of the medical team at the hospital of St. Eligius was welcomed both of the media and groups from the health sector, but it did not help to mitigate repeated accusations of yuppyism for characters designed by yuppies, the contradictions of which resulted from the complex combination of vocation and ambition that characterised the different protagonists. TV3 broadcast *St. Elsewhere* in 1986.

The new 'dirty realism' induced by *Hill Street Blues* in *St. Elsewhere* reached its peak in *E.R.* (NBC, 1997-2008), a successful combination of personal stories and professional cases, seasoned with very high doses of action and led by light, daring camerawork, capable of providing the viewer with a subjective perspective of the different stories. Sarcasm constitutes another essential ingredient of a programme that North American doctors accused of lacking in realism but which has millions of fans worldwide. The long-running NBC series, created by the prolific Michael Crichton on the request of Steven Spielberg, is about to complete its 14th season in the USA and it is expected to end 2009 with the 15th and last season of just four episodes.¹¹ TVE-1 has been broadcasting *E.R.* in Spain intermittently since 2001.

To date, *E.R.* has been nominated 130 times for EMMY awards, testimony to the series' great impact. However, its popularity among doctors themselves¹² has not been enough to save it from repeated criticism by other groups in the health sector, which on occasions have even asked advertisers to cancel their ads.¹³

After the success of *E.R.*, which is a landmark in hospital drama, NBC also renewed medical comedy with *Scrubs*

11 <<http://www.variety.com>> from 11 March 2008 [Consulted 14 April 2008]. 309 episodes of *E.R.* have been broadcast as of 1 May 2008.

12 In a debate held at the Madrid Press Association in May 2007, on the representation of doctors in the media, Doctor Verónica Casado, president of the National Committee of Specialties, stated that *E.R.* had become a cult series among Spanish doctors. <http://www.diariosur.es/prensa/20070510/gente/medicos-prefieren-rigor-urgencias_20070510.html> [Consulted 14 April 2008].

13 In 2005, the Center for Nursing Advocacy launched a campaign asked 23 large sponsors of NBC/Warner to withdraw their ads for *E.R.* in order to pressurise the producers to improve how nurses are portrayed. <http://nursingadvocacy.org/press/releases/2005/er_sponsors.html> [Consulted 14 April 2008].

(2001-), broadcast in Spain by Canal + and Cuatro. Along the lines of *M.A.S.H.*, *Scrubs* combines the comical and dramatic elements of the former with agile plots to construct a gallery of characters as peculiar as those from *M.A.S.H.*, led on this occasion by the surrealist narrator, Doctor John "J.D." Michael Dorian, whose dreams (heir to the purest sarcasm of *Ally McBeal*) can be seen by the viewers.

Strong Medicine (Lifetime, 2000-2006), the first alternative production to the proposals by the large networks, was another of the acquisitions of TV3 which Catalan viewers could see in 2002. Created and produced by Whoopi Goldberg, *Strong Medicine* centred on the activity of two female doctors working in a women's health centre, which allowed Goldberg's programme to tackle issues only suggested by a subgenre that, although its audience is mostly female, traditionally adopts a male perspective. The excellent audience ratings of a programme repeatedly classified as feminist (whose seven seasons on air have made it the longest running drama for a cable channel) encouraged other subscriber channels such as FOX (*House* or *Private Practice*) to explore the territories of medical fiction that had hardly been touched by the networks.

Just when it seemed that the social sphere was the privileged point of reference for medical productions after *E.R.*, hospital dramas from the second half of 2000 converted the realism of their predecessors into hyperrealism, in an authentic exercise of technical and technological skills in the style of *CSI*, distancing itself from the ethical dilemmas of the preceding period by mutating the conflicts and detachment of the previous characters into frivolity (*Nip/Tuck*, 2003-; *Grey's Anatomy*, 2005-) or extravagance (*House* 2004-).

Unlike *Quincy*, the research carried out by *House* is not police-based but medical, so that the clues provided by forensic investigation are symptoms that camouflage/reveal the illness. The star, a modern-day Sherlock Holmes from Princeton, whose exploits become TV stories dotted with

reality show style visual effects,¹⁴ is also filtered by Umberto Eco's Guillermo de Baskerville (*The Name of the Rose*, 1980) but seasons the arrogance of its literary references with the surrealism of the *Scrubs* narrator and the vulnerability of the *E.R.* doctors.

Unlike the other great TV giants, *House* has spectacularly increased its audience ratings in the United States season after season¹⁵ and has inspired the documentary series *Medical Challenges* that, at the time of writing, is being produced by Four Luck Banana. 'Housemania' has also affected Spain since it premiered on Cuatro on 24 January 2006 and, although none of the episodes of the fourth season (broadcast between 8 January and 4 March 2008) has equalled the record of more than four million achieved on three occasions in 2007, its impact on public opinion is still notable, as shown by the different statements issued by the OMC and TV viewer associations or the most recent by the SEN, mentioned at the start of this section.

One year after the renovation of medical drama carried out by *House*, *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) reinvented the hospital soap opera (inaugurated by ABC in 1963 with *General Hospital*). Inspired by its creator's fascination with relations between health professionals, scriptwriter Shonda Rhimes, *Grey's Anatomy* combines the themes and narrative continuity of a serial with the production and episodic structure of a series, along the lines of another great programme by ABC, *Desperate Housewives*, (ABC, 2004-), inspired by the voice in off of Meredith Grey concerning the human relations induced by the specific theme of each episode.

The dominance of the personal over the professional in *Grey's Anatomy* turns Seattle Grace Hospital into the background for relations between the students and interns and leads to a different receptive attitude in viewers that, unlike the audience for *House*, no longer feel as stimulated to convert the medical environment represented into a reference in the real world. *Grey's Anatomy* has therefore hardly been criticised by health professionals for reasons other

14 The hospital reality show (*Life in the E.R.*, TCL, 1997-2004; *Women Docs*, Lifetime, 2001, *Maternity Ward*, TCL, 2000-2001; *Code Blue*, TCL, 2002, etc.) has notably influenced the figurative construction of medical fiction. The docuseries *Bellvitge Hospital* (TV3, 1999) is a good example of the mix between reality and fiction that feeds both TV macro-genres in the area in question, although, in this case, what was spectacular is always subordinate to social aspects.

15 The episode "Frozen", 3 February 2008, achieved the record figure of 30,310,000 viewers.

than that of frivolity in its portrayal of characters, these being traditionally provoked by any medical drama. Moreover, the racial diversity of the protagonists (the result of a 'blind casting' in which race was not taken into account) has been well received by North American public opinion.¹⁶

The success of *Grey's Anatomy*, conceived initially only for broadcast for a single season, has led ABC to extend a series that also tops the ranking of North American fiction and even has a sequel, *Private practice*, (2007-). This last series is constructed around the character of Addison Montgomery (Kate Walsh) who, incapable of continuing to fight for her husband (head of neurosurgery and the lover of Doctor Grey), moves to the Oceanside Wellness Clinic in Santa Monica, where her friends Naomi and Sam Bennett work. The initial criticism due to the excessive importance of Doctor Montgomery¹⁷ and the inevitable comparison of *Private Practice* with *Grey's Anatomy* have not reduced viewers' interest in a series whose favourite target audience is aged between 18 and 49. Antena 3 TV has bought the rights to this programme, which Fox Spain has been broadcasting since 10 January.

Spanish hospital drama

The localisation of *Farmacia de guardia* (Antena 3 TV, 1991-1996) encouraged the introduction of medical themes in the first series of Spanish contemporary production for fiction, although it only served to contextualise the everyday relations of a divorced couple, their two children and the assistant in the chemist shop run by Lourdes Cano (Concha Cuetos).

In 1995, the premiere of *Médico de familia* (Telecinco, 1995-1999) turned Doctor Nacho Martín (Emilio Aragón) into the most popular Spanish fictional doctor and, although the area of health was also the background to the family and sentimental relations of this Globomedia series, a greater pedagogical intent could be observed than in *Farmacia de guardia* when tackling social issues related to illnesses or

disabilities. In the last season of *Médico de familia*, the inclusion of Doctor Martín in the emergency unit of the health centre (a narrative strategy aimed at increasing the dynamism of the different stories that went to make up each episode) allowed new themes to be introduced, such as work-related and traffic accidents, etc. .

Notwithstanding this, Antena 3 TV was the first Spanish channel to make the incursion into hospital fiction drama in 1996, with a series that the Catalan production house, Gestmusic, filmed in Terrassa Hospital starring Xavier Elorriaga, Mercedes Sampietro and Jaime Pujol. Like its predecessors, *Hospital* focused more on personal relations than on hospital issues per se, these providing the framework for the different plots starring the doctors and nurses of the health centre. This series' debut on prime time on Antena 3 TV went practically unnoticed in the summer period when it started, a fact that determined its intermittent presence on the programming grid of the only five episodes to be broadcast (between 1 July and 25 August 1996), the average audience for these being 1,632,400 viewers (18.7%).

The success of professional dramas such as *Periodistas* (Telecinco, 1998-2002) and *El Comisario* (Telecinco, 1999-), together with the transition undergone by the last season of *Médico de familia* and the impact among critics of *E.R.*, constitute the precedents for *Hospital Central*, one of the most profitable programmes for Telecinco since it started on 30 April 2000 to the present day, as shown by its 4,114,000 viewers (24.1%) on average, in its fourteenth season. Undoubtedly based on *E.R.*, whose copyright restrictions Videomedia managed to avoid, *Hospital Central* combines medical cases in a hospital A&E ward with the dense web of love and broken hearts among the medical staff.

Telecinco's series has won a large number of awards, including those given by different viewer associations, of note being the different awards given to Jordi Rebellón, the actor who plays the surliest doctor at Hospital Central, Doctor Vilches. The introduction of charitable actions in the last two seasons of Hospital Central (with episodes set in Guatemala and India, respectively), acts as a counterweight

16 O, *The Oprah Magazine* <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/omag_ocut_flash.jhtml?issue=200612> [Consulted 14 April 2008]

17 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-yn/content/article/2007/09/25/AR2007092502418.html>> [Consulted 14 April 2008]

to growing criticism from the health sector due to the huge licence with which the programme portrays the activity of the A&E unit of a large hospital, as well as the frivolity with which the many and changing sentimental relationships between the protagonists are handled.

The success of *Grey's Anatomy* on Cuatro and the need to rejuvenate the audience for *Hospital Central* led to *MIR*, another medical drama on Telecinco starring five students and the respective staff doctors. The audience ratings for the first season (broadcast between 10 January and 29 March 2007) were below the channel's average, but the increase of the last three broadcasts made Telecinco decide to extend the series after some modifications. However, the introduction of new items such as euthanasia, genetic therapies, natural birth, etc. and the profusion of special collaborations by famous actors were not enough to improve on the figure of 2,303,000 viewers (13.4%) obtained at the start of the second season early in 2008, which ultimately led to the series being cancelled. On the other hand, neither the increase in socially controversial issues nor the inclusion of a disabled female character among the main characters (a houseman who was deaf due to meningitis) was enough to offset the large amount of criticism for the series on the part of the different professional groups represented, on this occasion in addition to that of TV critics.

Unlike Telecinco, when it embarked upon its hospital drama, Antena 3 TV preferred to focus on nurses with *CLA. No somos ángeles*, a daily strip of Euro-productions that inaugurated the 2007-2008 season. Although Antena 3 TV stated it was firmly committed to realism, claiming that it had permanent professional advice and had also included a doctor on the scriptwriting team for *CLA* (acronym for "Clínica Los Ángeles" or Los Angeles Clinic), the lesser relevance of the medical sphere in the serial compared with the series and the limitations inherent to the format with less budget than TV fiction did not convince either critics or audiences. For this reason, the channel Planeta cancelled *CLA* one month after it started, after 23 episodes and two changes in broadcasting time, giving it an average audience of 1,001,000 viewers (10.76%).

At the time of writing, Antena 3 TV has announced that it has acquired the rights to adapt *Doc Martin*, a 'dramedy' by the British channel ITV with a legion of admirers in the UK.

On this occasion, Doctor Martin (the star of two TV films before adopting the serial format) deconstructs one of the classic references of medical fiction (the successful surgeon who swaps a hospital in the big city for a provincial practice), with a tragic-comic character (played by Martin Clunes) who, unlike the pleasant characters in series such as *Doc* (CBS, 1973), *Doc Eliot* (ABC, 1973), *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990-1995) or *Providence* (NBC, 1999-2002), this time is characterised by his lack of tact and empathy.