TV dramas must tune in to the truth to prevent misconceptions

With a growing focus on health issues on television, nurses can help programme makers to ensure the public receive accurate health education, says soap adviser Victoria Harmer.

The increasing focus on health related issues in television dramas makes it vital for programme makers to ensure their storylines are clinically accurate. Nurses can help them do this.

Inaccurate portrayal of medical issues can lead to public misconceptions or false expectations about services.

HIV, SARS, BSE and nvCJD, anaphylaxis, dementia, blood clots, miscarriage and mental health problems have all featured in TV dramas in recent years. In 2009, Coronation Street had 22 medical storylines involving ambulance crews, medical emergencies and consultations.

The question is: does this have any impact on public perception or behaviour regarding health and illness?

Although conflicting, the evidence does suggest that there is a link between plots and public behaviour. For example, while it seems there is no increase in the number of suicides if a television character attempts suicide, there may be a link with the choice of drug that people choose to overdose with.

However, when cancer gets the leading role, the repercussions are significant. The media plays an important role in information provision about the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer, as well as informing health policy and personal experience.

The effects of a 2002 storyline on cervical cancer in Coronation Street included a 21% increase in those attending cervical screening in the North West in the following 19 weeks. Whether this was due to increased awareness or public anxiety, it still resulted in a higher screening attendance rate, which can only be good.

So, can these programmes endorse health promotion activities? Health education involves communicating information on underlying conditions that affect health, as well as creating opportunities for learning, improving and disseminating knowledge; perhaps what some may say results from a well researched storyline.

Actions have consequences and, regarding potential scaremongering, the ramifications of storylines focusing on illness can be far reaching. The programmes I have advised (BBC Radio 4’s The Archers, Five’s Family Affairs and ITV’s Coronation Street) all had researchers who seemed dedicated to getting the facts correct. However, all three characters who had treatment for breast cancer were young (pre-menopausal) – in reality a minority of those who develop this disease. Perhaps breastcancerinyoungwomen is thought to be more sensational?

Some programmes do get their facts wrong. An EastEnders character was diagnosed with a benign breast lump and it took two weeks for her to get her results, when it would normally take a day or two. This could lead to patients being unnecessarily worried about lengthy delays in diagnosis.

There seems to be a cycle; that is, the more articles on a condition in medical journals, the more likely it is to feature on television, in magazines and newspapers. This media coverage promotes charity fundraising, and prominent celebrities will acknowledge their condition and champion it, which in turn sparks more media interest.

Nursing has traditionally had a distant relationship with the media when trying to use it to communicate with the public, with few nurses willing to speak on the record. Often, even when they are key experts on a subject, nurses are reluctant to engage in dialogue, possibly due to a lack of confidence or understanding of the way the media works.

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