



# Don't pharmacists have sex appeal?

EVER NOTICE HOW MANY SHOWS THERE ARE ON TELEVISION PROFILING doctors, nurses, police officers, lawyers, even cake decorators, but nothing showcasing pharmacists? Are our lives and daily experiences not interesting enough for prime time drama? Why doesn't the public find us "sexy"? Have you ever asked someone that question? I polled some of my friends in the entertainment industry by e-mail, to see what they thought.

To draw in viewers, producers must look for conflict and a dramatic question that makes up the core of each show. Each episode has some sort of conflict and resolution. "Genre TV is popular for this reason," explains Vicki Madden, story producer from the popular UK drama, *The Bill*. "Medical or hospital dramas ask, 'Will they live or die?' Police dramas ask, 'Will good outweigh evil?' What is the dramatic question for a drama set in a pharmacy?" The life of a pharmacist isn't that dramatic. What kinds of scenarios could sustain an entire season consisting of 24 episodes — after all, there are only so many different ways you can depict miscounting! Madden adds, "if it was a corrupt pharmacist you could incorporate that character into a police drama. Then again, you could do a family drama à la *Six Feet Under* and have the pharmacy business as the core element." As it turns out, one of Madden's friends is currently developing that idea, but she adds, "you would still have to ensure you had enough conflict and drama to sustain good ongoing storylines."

Catherine Kolody, producer of the short movie *Tahune's Beast* in Tasmania, Australia, explains, "People's view of what a pharmacist does comes from their local chemist or supermarket pharmacy: professional, chemistry-type people in white lab coats who dispense medications and sometimes counsel you on side effects or interactions." Kolody confirms what Madden had earlier said on drama and conflict and says, "Dramatic tension, essential in any television or film story, depends on both settings and characters which lend to a seemingly unending supply of storylines." Kolody explains that hospital dramas are unique and fascinating to the viewer because they give viewers life and death situations that they don't normally encounter. The ability of doctors and nurses to save lives captivates viewers. As a part-time nurse, Kolody concedes, "While a pharmacist may, in real life, play an integral role in these life-saving endeavours, the average viewer has no concept of this. A pharmacist identifying a potentially fatal drug interaction seems exciting, but can it carry an entire episode?" Catherine confesses that there is only so much that a producer or writer can do with the character of a pharmacist, stating, "The

pharmacist in drama suffers from a dichotomy that leads to a finite number of character possibilities — either they are boring, stable and pedantic or they've gone bad and into business for themselves. Right or wrong, this is the perception." Are we not, as a profession, promoting our value to society enough, resulting in an image of a one-dimensional character and livelihood?

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Besides television shows, other mediums can be used for public education and promotion of the profession of pharmacy. In North America, commercials have a huge influence on the public. Every day, thousands of advertisements bring patients into community pharmacies, where they ask for the latest in nonprescription and, in the case of US advertising, prescription therapies for ailments they *might* have, or have been *told* they might have. Commercials are driving sales and influencing the public so much now that even professionals are showcasing their services. While many professionals abide by a noncompetition agreement, many professional bodies are simply advertising their services and benefits to society: dentists, medical clinics, nurses, physiotherapists, massage therapists and even chiropractors. Where is the commercial from your pharmacy organization? If the public doesn't know that we do more, as a profession, than just lick, stick and pour, we truly are a profession that has no sex appeal for TV. Our profession needs to get the message across to the public that we benefit society. Gone are the days where word of mouth can simply convey good services. Rob Vincent, Art Director at Tom Powell Design Studio and Marketing Director for Pride Winnipeg Festival Inc., states "to advertise is to create awareness and television enables you to reach a much broader audience. If you run a print ad, you risk the chance that only those interested in the subject matter of the magazine will see your ad. Television has specific shows, but it reaches a much broader audience than specialized publications. Plus, in a commercial you can quickly provide a lot of information in a short amount of time. If the profession of pharmacy wants to showcase its talents, then a commercial would give you the biggest bang for your dollar." He adds, "the public already knows that you exist, they just don't know what you do, exactly."

Some might argue that it is not the professional organization's responsibility to enlighten the public on what a pharmacist does, or that the profession doesn't need to bathe in the limelight — we are a science, after all, not a dramatic art — our value is in the work we do and making sure we get the right drug to the right patient, in the right dose! But one cannot deny that there is a

huge gap between the public's perception of our profession and what pharmacists actually do. Briony Kidd, an award-winning screenwriter in Australia who wrote in an open discussion forum on Facebook regarding the question, *Are pharmacists unsexy for TV?* states, "Um, they just dispense pills? Not very dramatic, is it? Unless (there is the) occasional drug addict that you have to refuse to serve or old lady who's brought in the wrong prescription. I guess the jelly beans can get exciting if you eat too many." Tasmanian costume designer Rebecca Thomson adds, "Yeah, medical checkout chicks. Not very interesting. And they don't generally have much contact with patients/clients. They just hang out the back of the pharmacy putting pills in packets and printing labels. As Briony says, not very dramatic. I have heard a few stories about pharmacy students who like sampling and selling their own creations. Maybe there is a story there." Coming to the conclusion that basing an entire dramatic series on pharmacists is hard to even conceive, Kidd does acknowledge that there would be no problem in incorporating a pharmacist character into any other show. "They're not 'unsexy'... but just that you would have to be extremely bloody clever to hang a whole show around them. (It) could be done, but it would take an amazing concept/writer."

While prime time television may be out, reality TV is always a possibility. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, reality TV accounted for only 20% of cable and network television programming. A decade later, that number has exploded to nearly 40% of programming and has brought in a lot of money for the cable networks where 90% of these shows can be found.<sup>1</sup> Reality TV is not just a hit in North America, but also dominates programming in the UK, Australia, Japan and India. So a reality TV show based on pharmacists may not be so farfetched. The profession has many different and challenging situations to keep such a series alive, from pharmacists working in busy community pharmacies, pharmacies located in the "ghetto," hospital pharmacists on wards, policy-makers, to pharmacists in war zones with the military. With clever editing, a dramatic score and some good-looking pharmacists, the show could be just what the profession needs — a kickstart giving us "sex appeal."

The subgenre of a pharmacist-based reality show would be an interesting choice as well. Documentary style would be mind-numbingly slow and wouldn't change the public's perception that our profession is boring. Special living environments, such as those found on *The Real World*, wouldn't make sense for our profession. I don't think any famous person would want the world to know what medication they are taking, so that eliminates any celebrity-based show about pharmacy that caters to the stars. Dating-based competitions, job searches, sports-based, self-improvement (like *The Biggest Loser*) and renovation style all fail to hit the mark. The only subgenre that would make sense is termed "professional activities," where the show portrays professionals going about their day-to-day activities or performing a project over the series. The earliest examples of this subgenre include *COPS* and *Trauma: Life in the E.R.*, but now include *Miami Ink* (USA), *Airport* (UK), *Bondi Rescue* (Australia) and *Motorway Patrol* (New Zealand).

## Pharmacists on the big or small screens

- *It's a Wonderful Life*: Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey saves Mr. Gower the pharmacist from a dispensing error that would have resulted in a child being poisoned.
- *Grace Under Fire*: Dave Thomas played the town's bachelor pharmacist, Russell Norton, Grace's on and off dating partner.
- *Desperate Housewives*: George the psychotic pharmacist (Roger Bart) was obsessively in love with Bree (Marcia Cross), and killed her husband in the hopes of being with her.
- *Family Guy*: Mort Goldman is a friend of the main character's, and is a neurotic hypochondriac with terrible social skills.
- *Nurse Jackie*: Eddie (Paul Schulze) manages the hospital pharmacy and is having an affair with Jackie (Edie Falco), who is using him to feed her drug addiction. On the plus side, he rides a motorcycle.

What would we title our reality show? Personally, I like *Pill Pushers*... but that isn't doing any justice to our profession and what we really do on a daily basis. The reality is that our profession doesn't need a TV show to be considered sexy. Our expertise, ease of public accessibility and paycheques already make us one of the most sought after professions and the public already considers us the most trusted health care profession. *That* gives us sex appeal. However, we are still failing to let the public know that pharmacy is a multifaceted profession, that we offer many different types of services and that the work we do, the pressures we are placed under and the life-saving decisions we make should not be undervalued and treated like fast food. We can't blame the public for our lacklustre image in this consumer-based industry, for they only know what they see, and what they see on television are the advantages of every other profession, health-related or otherwise, but not ours. We only lack sex appeal because the public has no other image of us in their minds. Maybe it's not society, but our professional organizations that need a good reality check? ■

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## References

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