



# DOCS on DOCS

**The demand for medical documentaries has never been higher, resulting in a drive for ever more innovative programming, *Neil Crossley* reports.**

**C**ompassion, empathy and a growing awareness of health and wellbeing are among the factors driving demand for medical documentaries. From hospital docudramas chronicling the challenges of medical staff to deeply personal and inspirational accounts of suffering, these very human and emotional stories of life-and-death struggles hold enduring appeal for audiences across the globe.

“Health and medicine have always been strong performers for us,” says Harriet Armston-Clarke, director at TVF International. “But we have seen an increase in the number of channels and platforms dedicated to this genre over the past few years, for example, S+ in Portugal. There is more information—and misinformation—than ever before. So the hunger for quality, well-researched content is greater than ever.”

As the medical documentary genre has become an increasingly crowded space, producers and distributors are honing their techniques to deliver more innovative and engaging productions.

“There are so many medical programs out there, you have to work hard to stand out from the crowd,” says Nick Tanner, the director of sales and co-productions at Passion Distribution. “As audiences are becoming increasingly aware and informed in terms of their lifestyle choices, medical has grown in scope. Programming with a more holistic approach that encompasses health and wellbeing, diet and mental health is increasingly popular, as well as content that explores extraordinary medical conditions.”

One of Passion’s strongest sellers is *Don’t Tell the Doctor*, from Arrow Media. The series follows a team of doctors who come to the aid of people who have made their medical problems worse by self-diagnosis. Another success is *Darcey Bussell: Dancing To Happiness*, in which the former ballerina examines how dancing can improve mental wellbeing. Tanner says this one-off documentary reflects how medical programming is responding to growing concerns about mental health. Other Passion series doing brisk business are the celebrity-fronted series *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies* and *Dr Christian Will See You Now*.

## UNIVERSAL THEMES

Patrice Choghi, the senior VP of international at GRB Studios, says the best medical documentary series are rooted in universal themes that appeal to the human condition. “More and more programs are beginning to throw in spectacular elements to help make a splash in an ever-crowded field,” he says. “However, the simplicity of a well-created story structure cannot be overstated. Ultimately, people will tune in, or choose not to, based on the hook the underlying stories are anchored by and the revolving cast of compelling characters.”

Choghi says that GRB’s strongest seller “without a doubt” has been the long-running *Untold Stories of the ER*, a docudrama series that airs on TLC and Discovery Life.

“The show generally highlights the most fantastical elements of working within the emergency room environment,” he says. “The opportunity for viewers to take a peek behind the curtain into one of the most intense work





The slate of medical docs at Rive Gauche includes *Egg Factor*.

environments, with those at the front line describing their stories, has proven to be of sustained interest for years.”

Holly Cowdery, sales manager at TCB Media Rights, believes “the human aspect” of medical documentaries is driving this kind of content now, far more so than new scientific discovery-themed series. She cites as an example *True Medical*, one of the titles from TCB’s extensive deal with Transparent TV. The show was made for Nine Network in Australia. “*True Medical* shows a blind woman seeing for the first time, and a man previously confined to a wheelchair walking again. Although this is due to new technology, it’s the human emotions these stories conjure up that keep the viewer gripped.”

Advancements in technology are indeed boosting the medical docs space. Series such as *Dr Christian Will See You Now* use fixed-rig filming techniques to create an unfiltered and intimate feeling. Science-based productions also continue to have global appeal. Armston-Clarke at TVF International says the company’s strongest sellers have been *The Truth About Vitamins*, *The Science of Sleep*, *The Cholesterol Question*, *MS Wars: Hope, Science and the Internet* and *Medical Revolution*. She attributes their success to being “universally relevant, well-researched films with cutting-edge new science and technological innovations.” Breakthroughs in science and “myth-busting” have been the predominant innovations in the genre, she says.

Series that focus on unusual or extraordinary illnesses are also strong sellers. One of Passion’s successes is *The Woman Who Ate a House*, about a woman with pica syndrome, an eating disorder that involves ingesting non-food items, including, in this case, the plaster walls of her home. TCB Media Rights reports brisk business with *The Boy with No Brain*, the story of Noah Wall, who was born with less than two percent of his brain. Cowdery also cites Transparent’s catalog of similarly moving medical documentaries, such as *Erick: The Boy with No Face* and *The Incredible Hulk Woman*.

“I think people are always fascinated by unusual illnesses as they affect all of us,” says Cowdery, “but what separates these documentaries from the pack is that

you see the patient’s inspirational journey, as well as the doctor’s commitment and compassion. In the face of staggering obstacles, both patient and physician often get a positive ending.”

Jon Kramer, the CEO of U.S. sales house Rive Gauche Television, likens the appeal of his company’s medical documentaries to that of crime series. Suspenseful, innovative storytelling and improved reenactments are driving demand in the medical docs space, he says.

“Medical is a universal subject and an alternative to crime programming, as it caters to the same demographic. Two of our medical-related series, *Something’s Killing Me* and *My Misdiagnosis*, have been very well received. After launching these last year, we feel like there is certainly an appetite.”

Both series delve into the investigations of life-or-death medical mysteries, explains Kramer, examining puzzling behaviors that result in near-death struggles. Each episode chronicles a race against time to discover what, or who, is killing the patient. Doctors, scientists, and in some cases, federal investigators, act as medical sleuths to solve the mysteries.

“Both series are very well done and keep the audience guessing until the very end,” he says. “The audience loyal to crime is the same for medical mysteries: 25- to 54-year-old women.”

## HOT DOCS

Pivotal to the success of medical documentaries are the personality traits of the central characters who front them. Producers need to ensure that audiences will trust, believe in and warm to the doctors, consultants and other medical staff at the core of the series. They also need to exude natural personality and charisma on-screen.

“In the modern TV environment, doctors need to stand out from the crowd,” says Jes Wilkins, the chief creative officer of Firecracker, a sister production company to Passion Distribution. “Personality and diversity are key. They need to be engaging, show empathy and be credible.”



TCB’s *True Medical* goes behind the scenes of groundbreaking medical advances.



Commissioned by UKTV's W channel, *Dr Christian Will See You Now* has been a strong seller for Passion Distribution.

GRB's Choghi also highlights the importance of authenticity. "In this era of 'fake news' and fabricated personalities, credibility is key. Taking the time to truly vet the focal characters at the center of a series is not only imperative, but absolutely necessary for the integrity of the show," he says.

Rive Gauche's Kramer says that "relatable characters" are essential to the success of medical documentaries, while TCB's Cowdery highlights the importance of medical staff being able to relay information in a straightforward way.

"Contributors and presenters need the ability to translate often complicated medical language into something easily understandable and engaging to the viewer," she says. "The audience also wants to see their empathetic side and feel the passion for what they do shine through."

When it comes to filming medical staff and patients in hospitals, the challenges can be profound. Film crews need to be granted access. Hospitals, meanwhile, have to make sure they are complying with legal and ethical consent procedures. The goals of a production company and medical staff frequently conflict. Clinical teams often need privacy to focus on patient problems, which restricts the footage that is allowed to be captured.

## RESTRICTED ACCESS

"Access can be extremely challenging indeed," says Cowdery. "A hospital is not only a place of work but a place where life-and-death decisions are made daily. The idea that a camera crew could in any way impede this work is a huge concern and requires very detailed discussions. Privacy is also a big consideration; you are often filming people at their most vulnerable. There is a duty of care to all those who may appear both willingly and incidentally."

It's a view echoed by Choghi. "As a producer, you never want

to get in the way of actual people performing their jobs. You need to create your environment as best as you can and, to the best of your ability, map out what you are aiming to capture prior to any shoot."

The challenges of filming in hospitals were highlighted in 2012, when an article by medical staff at one of the hospitals featured in the BBC Three series *Junior Doctors: Your Life in Their Hands* was published in the *British Medical Journal*.

"During filming, the hospital followed robust procedures to assure legal and ethical consent processes for patients and staff," the article states. The hospital conducted a survey one month after filming started to collect

views on how the filming affected doctors, clinical teams and patient care. Staff reported an overwhelming desire to maintain "normality" wherever possible. But some of the clinical teams allegedly felt underprepared and "thrown into" filming, which led to increased anxiety and stress. One consultant reported: "They asked, 'Would you do one final interview?' and I said, 'Do you know what, I can't. I really cannot go through that. It's actually quite traumatic.'"

All of which prompts the question, Why would hospitals agree to participate in a medical documentary series? The answer lies in their desire to promote the work of their staff and to highlight their own struggles for survival in an under-funded age.

"They provide a valuable opportunity to communicate and explain their work and the issues that they face to audiences in a relatable way," says Wilkins of Firecracker, the company that produced *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies*. "For example, there is a crisis in midwife recruitment in the U.K. The hospital trust where *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies* was filmed believed that the series could—and did—have a positive impact on recruitment." ■



Sold by GRB Studios, *Untold Stories of the ER* wrapped its 13th season in 2018.