

## *Virtual Mentor*

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### VIEWPOINT

#### **If Laughter Is the Best Medicine, Who Is Scrubs Healing?**

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From *Marcus Welby, MD* to *ER*, medicine has been a mainstay of popular television drama. Generally, doctor stories on TV have resulted in good PR for the profession: the hard-working physician facing life, death, and personal drama strives to maintain individual and professional integrity every week for 60 minutes. Recently, comedy writers have turned to medicine for material. While *MASH* was a humorous critique of war, the new NBC show *Scrubs* turns to lampooning the medical profession itself.

Beyond its shortcomings as an unsubtle workplace comedy relying on internal monologue in the *Ally McBeal* mold (a device also found in *Working*, *Inside Schwartz*, *Titus*, and the upcoming *Imagine That*), *Scrubs* plays an interesting role in airing medicine's jokes and dirty laundry in public. Many of the jokes told in recent episodes are caricatures and observations students and physicians will recognize from in-house spoofs and class plays. Who hasn't worked with or couldn't recognize an overconfident and crass attending, a jaded and bigoted chief, a procedure-happy surgeon, a gunner, or a naïve misfit? These hollow, hyperbolic characters and stereotypes populate our internal jokes and self-spoofs, and *Scrubs* contribution to popular understanding of American medicine may end there.

Granted, the reputation of American medicine is not on the line Tuesdays at 9:30/8:30 central, nor should it be artificially protected from criticism by humor writers or anyone else. Yet, like reading an unauthorized biography, it is somewhat compelling to see what dust gets swept under which rug. Reality/anthropology TV notwithstanding, we can learn a lot about a group of people by looking at what jokes they tell about themselves. Perhaps that is what the writers of *Scrubs*, slotted between *Frasier* and *Dateline*, are intending.

Classical comedy, like its tragic counterpart, seeks to illuminate certain truths about humanity. Through buffoons, victims, characters we are meant to wish well, and those designed for our spite, we come to understand a little more about the human condition and ourselves. So if "*Scrubs*" accomplishes anything more than entertaining, it might be affording us a look at the human troubles and humor of coping with a first job out of school, in this case medical school, although the added years of schooling count for little, given the delayed adolescence of the main character, Dr. Dorian (J.D.), and his surgeon friend, Dr. Cox. For the show to succeed on network television, it must appeal to a broad audience, to "everyman,"

and many folks in new, confusing situations can see something of themselves in J.D.'s reactions and internal monologues.

*Scrubs* is not a very effective tool for teaching medical ethics—NBC's ad for one episode promises "J.D. (Zach Braff) is enchanted by an unseen female patient (guest star Elizabeth Bogush, 'Titans') who is trapped inside an MRI machine—and even considers asking her out." But it could help on the professional development front. Much has been written popularly about humor as a coping mechanism, and that may apply to students watching "*Scrubs*." There is camaraderie in a joke you can recognize in your own life, and in shared experience. Although "*Scrubs*" may be neither a documentary on the life of an intern nor a weekly dramatization of professional dilemmas, it does serve to show how bad (and funny) things can be. Perhaps medical students and interns will find their own difficulties with adjustment to a new or confusing situation normalized through humor.

Will patients act differently toward their physicians for having seen *Scrubs*? Probably neither more nor less than they would after watching *ER*. Perhaps one can triangulate a more realistic picture of American medicine through *ER* and *Scrubs* together as different kinds of exaggeration.

It is always beneficial to be able to laugh at oneself. To invite network television viewers to laugh along probably doesn't hurt either. There is plenty that isn't funny about contemporary medicine, so having a laugh at the system's expense is probably good medicine for all of us.

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