Death, Dying and Hollywood

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Objectives

- Review how television and movies depict death and dying.
- Evaluate what this depiction means to our patients.
- Discuss how to explain the reality of death and dying to our patients and families.

Wouldn't it be nice.....

Television and Movie “Reality”

- The Resuscitation Scene
- The Dying Patient
- The Death Scene

Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation

Baywatch Rescue
Study published in the NEJM in 1996

**CPR on Television**
- Success rate
  - Calculated the success rate of CPR on 3 TV shows (ER, Chicago Hope and Rescue 911)
  - Success on TV = 65%, success in real life = 2-30%
- Representation
  - 65% of the patients that received CPR were children or young adults, in real life elderly patients are the majority
  - Trauma was the cause of the cardiac arrest in 62% of the patients, in real life it is closer to 5-25%

Resuscitation on Grey’s Anatomy—Meredith survives with no deficits

Heaven's Prisoners
Rescue of a girl who has drowned

Other Problems
- The quality of the CPR being done is often poor
  - Some people learn CPR from TV
  - It doesn’t show the traumatic nature of CPR
- There was limited information about survival to discharge
  - Short term outcomes were the focus of the shows
  - If the outcome was shown it was either complete recovery or death

The Miracle of CPR
It even works in cartoons!

What does this mean to patients?
- People have unrealistic ideas of CPR/DNR
  - “I thought CPR could bring me back”
- Survey of patients over 62 yrs old
  - 92% received information about CPR from television
  - Patients also overestimated survival rates
  - Similar results have been found in other studies—survey of patients over 74 and patients with COPD
What can we do?

- Have the conversation
  - Start with “What do you understand about CPR or being DNR”
  - Explain the realities
    - CPR was originally meant to restart healthy hearts in the event of trauma or arrhythmia
    - After resuscitation (if effective) the patient will end up in the ICU and usually intubated
- You can still use media to help teach
  - A lot of educational videos exist about CPR
  - Use examples of more realistic portrayals
    - ...
They can actually get it right!

- Tom Hanks actually looks a lot like he is dying.
- There are a good number of independent films/documentaries about real patients that provide a more realistic view.
  - *Indestructible*
- These are the movies that we can use to help with education.
- A study done in college students showed that watching 10 hours of *Six Feet Under* was equal to a course in death education in changing attitudes about death.

Love Story - Jennifer dies of leukemia

ER - Man dies in the emergency room
What is missing from these scenes?
- Symptoms
  - Delirium
  - Dyspnea
  - Pain
  - Secretions
- Unresponsiveness
- Weakness
- Sick looking people!

What can we do?
- Similar to what I said for the CPR scenes--education!
- Most people don’t really believe everything they see on TV or in the Movies
- Medical professionals can educate the families about what they are seeing
  "The Blue Book"

Misperceptions
- The patient will be awake and able to interact until the end (from the Love Story scene)
- Morphine is what kills people (from the ER scene)
- The patient will be able to be active and participate in activities until the end (from the Battlestar scene)

Questions? Ideas? Examples?

References
- Can a television series change attitudes about death? a study of college students and six feet under: Schiappa E; Gregg PB; Hewes DE, Death Studies, 2004 Jun; 28(5): 459-74 (44 ref)
- Mastering Communication with Seriously Ill Patients: Back, Anthony; Arnold, Robert; Tulsky, James, 2009