

“Back When They Lost What Made Them People”—an Analysis of Ageism in Popular Medical Television

Introduction

- The term “Ageism” was first coined in 1968 by Dr. Robert Butler.
- Exposure to stereotypes (positive or negative) has been shown to impact older people.
 - Older patients exposed to negative age-related stereotypes performed worse in both cognitive and physical activities than those primed with positive stereotypes¹.
 - Elderly people who were primed with negative stereotypes about their age cohort were also less likely to accept life-prolonging interventions in hypothetical medical situations².
- Any ageism in popular medical TV has potential to have serious implications on elderly patient's health
 - and on how doctors see their elderly patients.

Methods

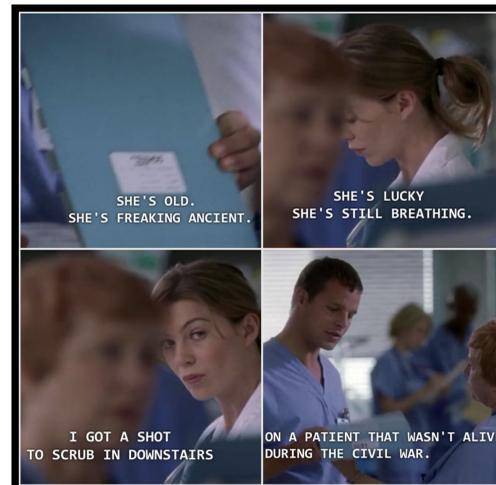
- The first seasons of three medical shows—*Grey's Anatomy*, *House*, and *Scrubs*—were reviewed.
- All patients who were interacted with physically or verbally by a main character were recorded, along with their given ages - If no age was given, it was estimated.
- Additionally, quotes were recorded that demonstrated ageist qualities.

Results



Table. Number (%) of patients across different age groups

TV Show (# of episodes)	age 0-15	age 16-30	age 31-60	age >60	Total # of pts	Average # of pts per episode
Grey's Anatomy (N=9)	3 (8.8%)	4 (11.8%)	23 (41.1%)	4 (11.8%)	34	3.78
Scrubs (N=24)	3 (3.8%)	11 (14.1%)	43 (55.1%)	21 (27.0%)	78	3.25
House (N=22)	12 (16.0%)	17 (22.7%)	42 (56.0%)	4 (5.3%)	75	3.41



Quotes that Exemplify Ageism

“Maybe I should have gone into geriatrics. No one minds when you kill an old person”

“She’s old, she’s ancient. She’s lucky she’s still breathing. I’ve got a shot to scrub in downstairs on a patient who wasn’t alive during the civil war.”

“Why does this gomer got to try and die every day during my lunch?”

“The man’s 92 years old. He has full dementia. He doesn’t even know we’re here. He’s inches from Carla’s rack and he hasn’t even flinched.”

“This isn’t really what I expected. Most of my patients are...older and sort of checked out mentally.”

“Pumpkin...that’s modern medicine. Advances that keep people alive who should have died a long time ago, back when they lost what made them people.”

“If I have to see one...one more gomer who is shuffled back and forth between some godforsaken home...”

“Well Mrs. Winston, it’s back to the home for you!”

“You have to grab my 3 gomers in 408.”

“Not bad for an 82 year old. She asked me to give that to her true love.”

“What can I say. Chicks with no teeth turn me on.”

“That’s...fairly disgusting.”

“And that’s ageism.”

“You better watch yourself around this ‘babe’.”

Discussion

- **Three major themes noticed during project**
 - The elderly are underrepresented in medical media.
 - When represented, geriatric patients are portrayed as enfeebled, burdensome, dehumanized.
 - Parallels can be drawn between how society treats the elderly and children, especially in regards to love/sex.
- **Possible hypotheses on why the elderly are so underrepresented in popular medical television**
 - May stem from society’s view that youth = beauty.
 - The shows target audience is younger.
 - Showing older people in hospitals might hit too close to an uncomfortable topic for viewers (aging/death/dying).
 - Older people with illnesses are not unusual and are therefore perceived as uninteresting.
- **What about the doctors on the show?**
 - In 2014 approximately 30% of doctors working in America were >60 years old³.
 - 54% were 50 years old or older.
 - No data recorded on this, but in general a majority of the doctor characters were in their residency.
 - The few that were not in residency were mostly young attending physicians.
- **Future Steps**
 - Repeat this study with all seasons of the shows.
 - An unbiased team to verify estimated ages.
 - Expand focus to include the ages of the doctor characters, not just the patients.
 - Comparison with older medical TV shows to examine ageism over time.

References

1. Levy, B., & Leifheit-Limson, E. (2009). The Stereotype-Matching Effect: Greater influence on functions when age stereotypes correspond to outcomes. *Journal of Psychology and Aging*, 24(1), 230-233.
2. Langer, E. J. (2009). *Counter clockwise: Mindful health and the power of possibility*, Ballantine Books, New York.
3. Young, A., et. al. (2014). A census of actively licensed physicians in the United States, 2014. *Journal of Medical Regulation*. 101, 8-23.