

How doctors are portrayed in the movies (a summary)

(Research by a US paediatrician Glenn Fores: on 150 movies! Arch Dis Child. 2004 December; 89(12): 1084–1088)

Here's the full paper

We found this summary on the University of Milwaukee website, and we've reproduced it below for convenience:

Flores found that in older movies physicians are portrayed as wise and dedicated healers, while in current films, most are avaricious and incompetent.

One theme seen frequently in movies about doctors is money and materialism.

"Money is often portrayed as the prime motivation for becoming a doctor and choosing a medical specialty in the movies,"

Movie doctors, sometimes base treatment decisions on the patients' ability to pay and are shown as bound by the strictures of insurance bureaucrats. And the foibles of both doctors and patients, consistently provide a treasure-trove of humor. His concern is that because of negative portrayals of doctors, patients' expectations and the doctor-patient relationship may be adversely affected. He also feels that films about doctors can serve the medical profession as useful gauges of public opinion and a valuable tool in training doctors.

A second theme is bureaucracy and healthcare systems.

"Movie doctors frequently face the frustrations and follies of having to confront inefficient bureaucracies and healthcare systems that hinder patient care," he said.

A third theme is humor, both intentional and unintentional. He cites episodes that make doctors laugh, even if the average viewer misses the humor, such as a doctor diagnosing severe edema of the abdomen and liver without ever touching the patient's abdomen, or a doctor using a light microscope to see a virus. In one movie, a doctor developed a cure for a virus in one evening's work. Since he is a pediatrician, Dr. Flores also looked at how his specialty is treated in movies. His conclusion: they are mostly absent. Only 2% of doctors in the movies he reviewed are pediatricians, all in movies from the 1940s.

His study includes an annotated "Top Ten" list of doctor movies which he considers the best, most humorous and most useful in medical education. This work builds on research he did two years ago when he reviewed 131 films in which one or more characters were doctors. That paper, published in the Journal of the National Medical Association in July 2002, details his major findings:

Compassion and idealism were common in older films but have become scarcer in newer movies.

Positive images of doctors have declined since the 1960s, while negative images have increased.

Doctors are often portrayed as greedy, egotistical, uncaring and unethical, especially in recent films.

A recurrent theme is the "mad scientist," the doctor-researcher who experiments on patients and values science over his patients' welfare.

Doctor movies continue to fascinate because they can be humorous, thought-provoking and informative of the public's perception of doctors," he said. "And they never cease to entertain. Movie doctors can provide insightful and realistic portraits of the challenges, rewards and excitement of being a doctor."

The "Top Ten" lists of doctor movies which Dr. Flores considers the best, most humorous and most useful in medical education:

Best

Red Beard (1965)

The Hospital (1971)

Article 99 (1991)

State of Emergency (1993)

Miss Evers' Boys (1997)

The Elephant Man (1980)

Panic in the Streets (1950)

Spellbound (1945)

Death and the Maiden (1994)

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Most Humorous

*M*A*S*H (1970)*

Body Parts (1991)

High Anxiety (1977)

The Patriot (1999)

What About Bob (1991)

Carry on Doctor (1968)

Doctor at Sea (1956)

What's New Pussycat (1965)

Torture Ship (1939)

Malice (1993)

Most Useful in Medical Education

The Doctor (1991)

Arrowsmith (1932)

The Citadel (1938)

Not As a Stranger (1955)

Pressure Point (1962)

Whose Life is It Anyway (1981)

Miss Evers' Boys (1997)

The Interns (1962)

Critical Care (1997)

And the Band Played On (1993)