Rebecca McWilliams settled into her chair to take a break from routine housework and watch her favorite soap opera, *All My Children*. She had a pretty good idea of what to expect: the familiar cast, chaotic situations and heart-wrenching drama. She got some of that, but also learned what to do if her daughter ever shows warning signs of an eating disorder.
Across town, Elaine Gray has just learned that Ashley, one of the lead characters in The Young & The Restless, has breast cancer: “I wouldn’t have known the warning signs for breast cancer until this episode. And I didn’t know that the signs for breast cancer can be different for each woman,” said the professional counselor. Grey watches the soaps sporadically and observed that she is seeing more and more health-related subplots in soaps.

While some write off daytime dramas as “frivolous time gobblers,” few can deny the impact of a powerfully told story. Millions of Americans are enthralled daily by the gritty tales of betrayal, redemption and inspiration that are shown on the soaps.

Since the advent of television, marketers have attempted to harness the power of broadcast, successfully wooing the viewing public with persuasive advertising. But it wasn’t until just a few years ago that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention started to work with daytime and prime time dramas as a vehicle for important public health messages.

Today, daytime dramas that convey health messages didactically through their story lines are rewarded at the annual Sentinel for Health Award for Daytime Drama. The Sentinels strive to recognize exemplary daytime drama “that informs, educates, and motivates viewers to make choices for safer and healthier lives.”

The Sentinel Awards are administered by the new non-profit organization Hollywood, Health & Society, funded through a cooperative agreement by the CDC to the USC Annenberg’s Norman Lear Center. Vicki Beck, former director of the CDC’s entertainment outreach program, serves as director of the USC program.

“When I was working at the CDC, we were interested in trying to reach writers and producers with health information because we knew that TV shows were doing a lot of health story lines and audiences paid attention. We also knew that non-medical shows frequently had health story lines. So we felt like there was an important need to reach writers and producers with information that they could use,” said Beck.

“Since our debut last April at USC, we’ve had an opportunity to meet with some very popular shows that are reaching a lot of people. Shows like Boston Public have addressed obesity; Crossing Jordan addressed E.coli. Shows like ER have done story lines on sexual perpetrators, driveway deaths and infectious diseases like smallpox and HIV.

The story lines have multiple applications for health education. CDC’s program on antibiotic resistance uses a clip from ER to educate their partners at state health departments and other organizations: “This is just a clip of one episode, but they like to use it as part of their educational effort,” said Beck.

NPHIC Vice President Ken August is the liaison between NPHIC and Hollywood, Health & Society.
“NPHIC members support a number of different CDC campaigns, providing advice and expertise on media relations and outreach. I have been working with the Sentinel Awards for a few years now. In the process, I was surprised to learn just how much of an impact soap operas can have on the audiences we are trying to reach with important health messages,” said August.

Diana M. Bonta, director of the California Department of Health Services, is on the advisory board for Hollywood, Health & Society, and August has served on several Sentinel panels of judges. Story lines are reviewed by CDC experts and external judges. The 2002 Sentinel Award for Daytime Drama winner was “Tony's HIV” from The Bold & The Beautiful.

In the winning series, Tony, the main character, gains awareness of his HIV status, and how AIDS impacts the larger community. He ultimately travels to Africa with his new wife and adopts a child who is HIV positive. At the conclusion of two episodes, Tony came back on screen and presented the CDC toll-free phone number for information on HIV.

The CDC reported that following these two episodes they received an astounding number of phone calls from people seeking information about HIV and AIDS, with dozens more callers than usual.

Actress Judith Light, the tough bureau chief on Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, presented the 2002 Sentinel for Health Awards for Daytime Drama. In Spotlight Health magazine, Light endorsed the soaps as “one of the best ways you can find out things about your health that you might not know. They can expand your world.”

Hollywood, Health & Society also serves as a resource for writers by providing health information, offering assistance when a story line is being created, and suggesting important public health topics. The group is very proactive about contacting shows and writers directly. “We work with writers in a variety of ways, from creating materials that are tailored for writers online, to presenting educational programs and panel discussions at the Writers Guild of America, west,” said Beck.

Ken August encourages NPHIC members to participate, too. August will forward specific story ideas or thoughts about how public health can work better with the entertainment community to the Hollywood, Health & Society program.

“If there were an unusual public health-related story that might entertain and illuminate a larger issue, then that could be shared with Hollywood, Health & Society. The next time they have a meeting with writers and producers, they can bring up one of our suggestions as a topic for a future show.”
One-third (33%) of all respondents 18 years old and over report they watch daytime dramas at least a few times a month:

- Almost one-fifth (19%) are regular viewers who watch soaps two or more times a week.
- A majority of regular viewers (12% of all respondents) watch soaps four or more times a week.

Regular soap opera viewing is reported by:

- 25% of females and 12% of males
- 31% of African-Americans, 25% of Hispanics and 17% of whites
- 25% of ages 18-29, 20% of age 65 and over, and 16% of ages 30-64
- 26% of those with high school or less education, and 15% with college or more
- 29% of those earning under $20,000, 20% earning $20-50,000, and 12% earning over $50,000

The three sources from which regular viewers report they most often learned something about diseases or how to prevent them in the past year:

- Television (88%)
- Newspapers/Magazines (81%)
- Family/Friends/Doctors/Nurses/Others (74%)

Women who are regular viewers report they learned something about diseases or how to prevent them from soap operas in the past year:

- 53% of all women
- 69% of African-American women
- 56% of Hispanic women
- 48% of white women

More than one-third (34%) of regular viewers took one or more actions after hearing something about a health issue or disease on a soap opera in the past year:

- Told someone about it (25%)
- Told someone to do something to prevent the health problem (13%)
- Visited a clinic or doctor (7%)
- Did something to prevent the problem (6%)

More than four out of five (84%) of all respondents 18 years old and over report they watch prime time entertainment TV shows (like ER, Crossing Jordan, etc.) at least a few times a month:

- Half of all respondents (50%) are regular viewers who watch two or more times a week.
- Nearly half of regular viewers (23% of all respondents) watch four or more times a week.

Regular viewing is reported by:

- 52% of females and 49% of males
- 52% of whites, 48% of African Americans, and 34% of Hispanics
- 51% of ages 18-29, 52% of ages 30-64, and 40% of ages 65+
- 48% of those with high school or less education, and 51% with some college or more
- 52% of those with less than $20,000 income, 49% between $20-50,000, and 50% with $50,000 or more

The places noted most often (top three choices) by regular viewers for learning about diseases and how to prevent them in the past year:

- TV news/news magazine shows (63%)
- Newspaper (53%)
- Health care provider (52%)

Over half of all viewers report they learned something about diseases from prime time entertainment TV shows (51%):

- 63% of African-American women
- 46% of Hispanic women
- 49% of white women

More than nine out of ten regular viewers (92%) heard something about a health issue or disease on prime time TV shows in the past year, and nearly half (48%) took one or more actions as a result:

- Told someone to do something or did something themselves to prevent the health problem (16%)
- Told someone about the story or health topic (42%)
- Visited a clinic or doctor (9%)
- Called a clinic, health care place or hotline (5%)

Research

Formal research suggests that broadcast television storylines can successfully convey disease, injury and disability messages to hard-to-reach populations. CDC presented their findings at the American Public Health Association’s 128th Annual Meeting and Exposition, Boston, Mass., Nov. 15, 2000. In the 1999 study, “Soap Opera Viewers and Health Information: Healthstyles Survey,” the CDC reported on the characteristics of regular viewers of soap operas, determining that viewers learned about health information from the daytime dramas, and identifying actions they took as a result of watching these programs.

Who Watches the Soaps?

Astoundingly, more than 38 million Americans regularly watch daytime dramas. Nearly one-fifth of the national sample of adults 18 and over reported watching daytime dramas at least twice a week. One-third watched at least a few times a month. Based on characteristics of soap opera audiences from this and other surveys, regular viewers include some of the age groups, education levels, income levels and minorities most at risk for preventable diseases.

Findings revealed that people watching soap operas at least twice a week had more health concerns and more negative beliefs and behaviors about prevention practices than non-viewers. Frequent viewers also sought out health information more often than non-viewers but had more difficulty understanding the information they read. Not surprisingly, since statistics from the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) reveal some 40 to 44 million Americans with low levels of reading proficiency (NCFL, Facts and Figures 2003).

Almost half of the viewers reported learning something about diseases and prevention from daytime drama, and more than one-third took some action as a result. Women and African-Americans, groups with large numbers of regular soap opera viewing, reported the highest rates of learning and taking action as a result of something they saw on the soap operas.

And, if only a small percentage of viewers take action as the result of a soap opera health message, millions of people stand to benefit. Conversely, if story lines fail to convey accurate information, or show risky behavior without the associated health consequences, there is the possibility millions of people will suffer a negative impact.