

Medicine on the big and small screen: Hope and perseverance: *Grey's Anatomy* television series (2005 – present)

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Grey's Anatomy - Season 6. Photo 12 / Alamy Stock Photo

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When I was a first year faculty member, the pre-med students united in the dorm lounge to watch ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*. Sixteen seasons later, some of the best television writing has come from the Shonda Rhimes-led team of writers behind the series. I dare anyone who watched the final episode of Derek Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey) and Meredith Grey's (Ellen Pompeo) life together not to wonder at the extraordinary plot development that brought us to that heart wrenching, sob-inducing scene when she chooses to take her lover off life support.

Grey's Anatomy is not remarkable for its depiction of medical procedures—I think we can share a collective eye roll over Izzy cutting the left ventricular assist device (LVAD) wire to force a heart transplant for her boyfriend/patient in season three—but for three things:

1. The relationships among the women who mature from hormone-driven, ambitious, and precocious adolescents to competent (in some cases, extraordinary) physicians, partners, friends, mothers, and humans;
2. The men who emerge from ego-driven narcissists motivated alternately by their need to make medical history, and their desire to sleep with worshipful younger women whom they can mold into adoring models of themselves, into a group of friends defined by their shared losses, commitment to each other, and an idea of medicine practiced for the sake of others; and
3. An over-arching medical-humanities dream message, namely that medicine, when combined with the best of human intentions, is always, and can only ever be, a practice. For all the celebration of science in *Grey's*, the recurring themes are the fallibility of medicine, the limits of technology, the hope for better treatment, the need for better trained physicians, and the compulsion to combine humanity with science to save more lives more quickly, and to know when we have lost.

Without question, the physicians of *Grey's* saw far too many tragedies to be believed. There was the fire, the electrocution, the shooting, the bomb, the plane crash, and several car accidents. Any sane person would, as Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) did, flee for somewhere with a lower morbidity and mortality rate. But those tragedies prompted some exquisite television and illustrate the three previous points I made above.

Flight

The plane crash, written by Shonda Rhimes and directed by Rob Corn, involves nearly the entire cast of season eight. Broadcast May 17, 2012, this was the excruciating season finale and represented a transition from the first wave of characters to the second. In this episode, “Flight,” six of the physicians—Meredith, Derek, Cristina, Lexie Grey (Chyler Leigh), Mark Sloan (Eric Dane), Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw)—and the pilot, crash in a plane headed for an organ harvest. All are badly injured. Shepherd is sucked out of the plane and separated from the others, while Lexie is crushed under the plane. The pilot is pinned inside the plane and paralyzed. Meredith searches for Shepherd whose hand is so badly mangled that his life—not to mention, his career—rest in Meredith’s inexperienced hands. Yang and Sloan desperately try to save the others. Neither is a trauma surgeon, and while Yang is extraordinarily tough under pressure, this crash contributes to her post traumatic stress disorder and her eventual exit from the show. Lexie dies under the plane, holding Sloan’s hand while he quietly narrates the future that they should have had together. Their love story, which took seasons to mature, ends with a whisper.

Arizona’s leg is crushed, and though an immediate rescue might have allowed it to be repaired, by the time the six survivors are rescued, her partner—the orthopedist Calliope Torres (Sara Ramirez)—must make the decision to amputate it to save her life. Robbins does not forgive her for that decision, and it is certainly a contributing factor to their season 11 divorce.

Rhimes plays very far-sighted chess, and the rot at the roots of some of these complex relationships emerges under the pressure of the plane crash. But so does the rot she sees in medical education. Since he was hired as head of trauma at Seattle Grace, Yang’s partner, Owen Hunt (Kevin McKidd), complained about the residents’ lack of training in trauma care. His early weeks on the show saw him using skills labs and drills to attempt to increase the residents’ skills in this area. Neither Hunt nor his protegee, April Kepner (Sarah Drew), is on the plane.

The basic medical skills that such an emergency situation demands—combined with extreme cold, a lack of supplies, and terror—demonstrate the ways in which only extremely aggressive training might provide medical professionals with the wherewithal to save themselves and their colleagues. While each of the physicians on the plane who are well enough to care for others attempts to do so, only so much can be done. Death wins in this season finale, but so does love. Lexie, a resident on the verge of a promising life whose early days in the show were characterized by her role as Meredith’s rejected half-sister and a medical ingenue, dies a mature woman smiling at her lover.

Sloan returns to Seattle Grace the next season a far more mature man than the hotshot plastic surgeon nicknamed “McSteamy” who entered the hospital desperate to reclaim his friendship with Shepherd after sleeping with his friend’s first wife. It is that friendship, re-forged in the intervening years and tested by the complex bonds between Meredith and Lexie, that pulls Sloan through his final days to an enlightened death scene in which he tells his friend and plastic surgery resident, Jackson Avery (Jesse Wesley Williams), “If you love someone, tell them. Even if you’re scared that it’s not the right thing. Say it, and say it loud.”

As season nine begins, we are reminded of the fundamental lessons behind *Grey's*: death takes its toll, but the ties binding these characters make them capable of doing and withstanding extraordinary things.

Grey's Anatomy followed the late 1990s hit medical dramas *ER* and *Chicago Hope*. While many viewers thought *ER* served up the hottest doctors ever to grace television, *Grey's* has combined good looks with a medical humanity that *ER* did not attain.

Extreme trauma both prompts and reinforces the show’s central messages. While medicine demands great confidence from its practitioners, great medicine cannot be accomplished by egotists. Friendship, care, and love remain the human elements binding together everyone in medicine, and are as important as the science behind it. Great training—which requires constant re-evaluation, an acceptance of errors, and the ability to control them—makes better doctors of both teachers and residents. And finally, hope and perseverance deliver when talent falls short.

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