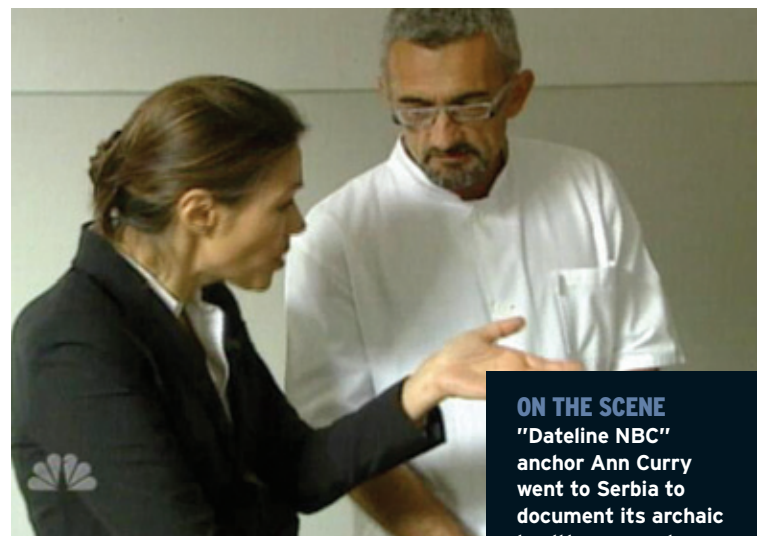


GRAY MATTER ABC's "Nightline" co-anchor Martin Bashir, right, broke a story about treating obesity with brain surgery.



ON THE SCENE "Dateline NBC" anchor Ann Curry went to Serbia to document its archaic health care system.

NEWSMAGS STILL OUT FRONT

Network Stalwarts Keep Breaking Ground With World-Class Reports

By **Hillary Atkin**

Special to TelevisionWeek

It was a spontaneous act of maternal nurturing that resonated round the world. Actress Salma Hayek, the mother of an infant daughter, decided to breast-feed an ailing infant boy in Sierra Leone as ABC News "Nightline" cameras captured the moment.

Ms. Hayek, along with "Nightline" anchor Cynthia McFadden and her crew, was in the impoverished African nation with UNICEF, which is spearheading a major drive to inoculate against tetanus, a preventable disease that kills thousands of children.

"It's always difficult to be in a place where people are suffering, particularly kids. It was a very painful yet hopeful trip," said Ms. McFadden, who was briefed by the minister of

health about the country's dubious distinction of having the highest child mortality rate in the world; one in five children dies before the age of 5 and more than 20% of those deaths are caused by tetanus.

"The dedication of the people we met and their commitment is so intense, and their success is terrifically optimistic in that regard," Ms. McFadden said.

When it comes to groundbreaking health journalism, television network newsmagazine programs use their resources to devote months of research to report on medical breakthroughs and often travel the globe to bring stories to viewers.

"Dateline NBC" anchor Ann Curry went to Serbia to investigate another heart-wrenching story involving chil-

dren, documenting how an archaic health care system—coupled with cultural stigma—dooms children born with mental disabilities to live their entire lives in underfunded and understaffed institutions without proper medical care.

"There are places in the world where the level of suffering is difficult to fully fathom," Ms. Curry said. She and her crew were able to videotape shocking conditions in three institutions in the eastern European country, which was formerly part of Yugoslavia. They then presented their findings to Serbian officials, who vowed to change things.

"Outrage is what causes change to occur," Ms. Curry said. "In the United States, we once had a shameful history in how we treated mentally ill peo-

ple, as all nations once did. They should at least be able to count on fundamental care and respect."

Improving the conditions also involves creating awareness in a culture that looks upon disabilities as shameful, so much so that there are many cases in which children are whisked away right after they're born, and their parents never get to see them.

"Children deserve to be with their parents. There are many of these children who don't need 24-hour care," Ms. Curry said. "It was a tragedy."

Martin Bashir, one of "Nightline's" anchors, last month broke a story about an experimental treatment for obesity that gives hope to thousands of people battling what often seems like an insurmountable condition.

In the piece, he chronicled the saga of Carol Poe, a morbidly overweight woman who underwent the most radical treatment ever devised for obesity—brain surgery. She is only the second person in the United States to have the surgery, called deep brain stimulation or DBS, to combat obesity—and Mr. Bashir and his crew got exclusive access to the operating room at a West Virginia hospital.

"It was one of those moments I felt I was on the cutting edge of science," said Mr. Bashir. "I've been present for surgery separating conjoined twins and a heart transplant, but I've never been in an operating room where someone's brain is being penetrated and they're awake, and it was breathtaking and miraculous. It was a huge privilege and the cusp of something remarkable."

Deep brain stimulation has already proved successful in treating neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease and epilepsy, by

eliminating or reducing the tremors and tics. Surgeons believe the procedure is effective in treating behavioral problems such as obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression, and now hold hope about using it to fight obesity.

The implications are immense: If hunger and satisfaction can be controlled by an electrical current in a patient's brain, it will be a major breakthrough.

"For people who are that overweight, life is difficult," said Mr. Bashir. "They are treated poorly in everyday life, and yet this woman is completely unembittered. Carol Poe is a remarkable woman. Twenty years ago, she had bariatric surgery, and she's 60 now and wants to resolve the problem. She's a well-educated, intelligent woman and the pain she felt was moving. She's very courageous."

"Nightline" reported on another pioneering medical procedure, using adult stem cells from bone marrow to regenerate bones. Orthopedic stem cell surgery has been practiced by only a handful of doctors nationwide, and reporter Juju Chang spoke with one of them about the hope that \$250 million in new federal funding for veterans will offer wounded soldiers a chance to heal from injuries that might otherwise have left them unable to return to work or even walk.

"It's pretty miraculous what they're doing," said Ms. Chang. "The word miracle is overused, but to witness what can only be described as miraculous bone regeneration was awe-inspiring. What is heartening is now all these ideas can be put to the test with stem cell treatments of every stripe." ■

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GETTING CAMERA- READY

Medical Communicators Group Helps Health Care Pros Handle the Spotlight

By Elizabeth Jensen

Special to TelevisionWeek

Medical communications can be the trickiest of journalism professions.

The information conveyed by health care professionals in the media can save—or cost—lives. When patients are involved, strict federal privacy laws come into play. On television, complicated, often technical messages must be delivered in increasingly shorter soundbites. And in the interactive digital world of the blogosphere, it's easy to lose control over how the information is used.

For 29 years, the National Association of Medical Communicators and the American Medical Association have teamed up to help medical professionals who are also broadcasters, writers, webcasters and organizational spokespersons to hone their skills, however optimal or not the reporting environment.

"... Physicians being tapped for their medical expertise ... could use some schooling."

Joanne Buckley, NAMC

At their recently concluded annual Medical Communications Conference in Santa Ana Pueblo, N.M., the agenda was laced with sessions devoted to helping attendees find their way in the increasingly complex media world, from a case study in how to satisfy demanding reporters and protect patient privacy when a public figure is hospitalized to training in reporting medical developments in one-minute snippets.

The organization, which in recent years has drawn about 150 people to its conference, can claim some illustrious alumni, including NBC News' Dr. Art Ulene and ABC News' Dr. Timothy Johnson. "Regular medical training doesn't really

prepare physicians to handle the spotlight," said Joanne Buckley, NAMC's executive director.

The annual meeting, she said, was born out of a "realization that there was a niche group of physicians being tapped for their medical expertise, and they could use some schooling." While media savvy is "more of an instinctive thing," she added, there are certain skills and rules that can be learned even as medical communicators try to find their way in the world.

At the early April gathering, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN's chief medical correspondent, was honored with the first annual Health Communications Achievement Award. Although not a member of the group, Dr. Gupta—who was being considered for the surgeon general post in the Obama administration before withdrawing his name in early March—exemplifies the heights to which medical communicators can aspire.

But Ms. Buckley said the conference isn't about fame. "It's bigger than being in front of the camera," she said, citing one group that attended the recent conference because they "believe that communications skills are key to delivering better medicine" and patient care. Dr. Gupta, she added, "will say the same thing: It's medicine first."

While the group previously was largely limited to physicians, today it is more encompassing, with members and conference attendees who are communications directors for specialty health associations, as well as nurses, dentists and even veterinarians.

"It's a nice meeting where all these parties can interact together," said Dr. Maria Simbra, a retired neurologist who is the medical reporter for Pittsburgh's KDKA-TV and the newly elected vice president of NAMC's board. The meeting allows journalists to interact with sources and come away with "more realistic expectations of what each party can do, what their roles are," she said.

Doctors who attend can get training in such basic skills as avoiding what Dr. Simbra called



A WINNER CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta, right, was honored with the first Health Communicators Achievement Award at this year's NAMC meeting.

"doctor-ese" when explaining information to lay audiences.

Too often, Ms. Buckley said, doctors "run to the safe zone of education and hard words," for instance, saying "cranial box" when "skull" will do.

But other skills taught at the conference have expanded along with the changing media landscape, and encompass everything from honing one-minute messages to using YouTube to speak directly to the public.

How to participate in blogging is a particular concern among medical communicators these days. One issue "is fear of the unknown," said Ms. Buckley. "It's not a controllable medium.

Some folks measure success of that medium by the virtue of something becoming viral; others say, 'Wait, wait, wait.'"

At the same time, she said, the beauty of blogs done right is that they can be linked to, eliminating some physicians' fears of being misquoted.

The issues get even thornier when it comes to dispensing medical information via newer elements of the digital world, such as Facebook and Twitter.

For those who are still drawn to television, the opportunities are changing. These days, "Reporters like myself are truly a luxury at many TV shops," said Dr. Simbra. Meanwhile, many

smaller-market stations have shifted to using syndicated medical news, eliminating in some cases their need for local medical experts.

Marketing for specific hospitals cloaked as medical news makes some in the profession nervous. But on the national level, the syndicated daily talk show "The Doctors" has gathered a large daily audience around the topic, creating even more interest.

For its 30th anniversary next year, Ms. Buckley said, the organization hopes to draw more younger members to its mix. The meeting will be in April, she said, although the precise date and location haven't been set. ■



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