

Q&A

CNN'S COHEN: KEEPING HEALTH NEWS SIMPLE

Veteran Makes Complex Issues Easy to Grasp

Elizabeth Cohen aired her first health story on CNN in 1991. Now the network's senior medical correspondent, Ms. Cohen has reported health and medical angles of major news stories, from Hurricane Katrina to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to the recent sudden death of actress Natasha Richardson.

Ms. Cohen has a master's degree in public health and has received a number of awards for her work, in addition to being honored by the Association of Health Care Journalists, the News-woman's Club of New York and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Her colleagues say she pursues health news with a passion and delivers it to viewers with a simplicity that's not patronizing or condescending, just easy to understand. She reports on-air several times each day and has a weekly column on CNN.com called "Empowered Patient," an informational consumer health segment.

Ms. Cohen spoke recently with *TelevisionWeek* special correspondent Hillary Atkin about the challenges and rewards of her health and medical beat.

TelevisionWeek: With President Obama recently signing the embryonic stem cell research bill, and knowing it was on tap several days beforehand, how do you prepare for a huge medical story like that?

Elizabeth Cohen: Actually I've been preparing for that for over a decade, since I've been doing stem cell stories. I covered the story the first time that they actually produced an embryonic stem cell line. I actually went to Israel to visit the labs of the scientist. When I knew that it was coming up, I had flashbacks to when I was sitting on the desk when President [George W.] Bush made his famous stem cell announcement back in 2001. And, I remembered all the discussion around that, all the different sides and all the different voices, one side saying this is going to be great and the other side saying this is going to be a disaster. But it was interesting to be sitting at the desk seven and a half years later—and, watching, being right there as President Obama reversed that decision.



Elizabeth Cohen

TVWeek: I understand you did at least 13 spots in two hours on-air. Tell us about that process and how you get ready to do so many reports in such a short period of time.

Ms. Cohen: It was a pretty intense day. My main objective when I sit down at the desk is I want the viewer to understand what I'm talking about. Sometimes I feel like reporters are talking to doctors. Or they're talking to politicians. I want to talk to my viewers, who are, for the most part, not doctors and politicians. So I think, what is the simplest way that I can explain this thing so that it's simple and accurate? And I feel like I've been successful when, later that day, people come up to me and they say, "Oh! Stem cells! Now I get it!" They got it because I really made an effort to explain it in a way that people could understand. So to me that's the most important thing with the segment, with a topic like stem cells, because it is so confusing. And you really can get bogged down in the minutiae of it. But I try to deliver sort of the take-home message for people.

TVWeek: How do you make complicated scientific information like that easy for the viewers to understand?

Ms. Cohen: I just lay it out there. I explained that the reason why embryonic stem cells are so controversial is that you have to destroy an embryo to make them. And I explained where those embryos come from. I think everybody knows someone who has had to have fertility treatments. Doctors go to those fertility labs, they take some embryos the parents don't want anymore, and they use those to do stem cell research. Then I try to explain what they do with those cells and how they could be useful, for example, if

you've had a heart attack, some of the muscle in your heart is damaged. And hopefully what will happen down the road is that you could make cardiac cells out of these stem cells and use those cells to repair the damaged heart muscle. So I try to bring it home in a way that everyone can relate to.

TVWeek: Speaking about fertility clinics, what sort of stories did you do on the octuplets? How did you begin your coverage and where are you now with it?

Ms. Cohen: The way I began my coverage, I could tell that I might have shocked some people, because before we knew who Nadya Suleman was, there was so much excitement about this. I mean people kept using the term "miracle," and saying it was wonderful. And I sat there on the set on CNN and said, "You know what? Fertility doctors do not consider this a miracle. They consider it a nightmare. This is what's not supposed to happen." The birth of any baby is a blessed event—I have four of them myself—but having eight babies is not a safe thing for the mom and it's not safe for the babies. I think people pictured in the beginning that this was a nice mom and dad somewhere who had been trying for years to get pregnant and finally were able to have a family, and when they realized that she was a little bit different than what people expected—nobody expected Nadya Suleman. I mean, you couldn't make her up. But of course they had a very different reaction than they had in the beginning.

TVWeek: How do you work in conjunction with CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta?

Ms. Cohen: We really work in parallel. We both cover the same stories. He's on some shows and I'm on other shows, and it's just sort of distributed at different points of the day depending upon our availability. He and I compare notes and we talk about stories.

TVWeek: You've said one of your most important goals is having empowered patients. But how can a medical journalist such as yourself make it easier for patients to be empowered in the U.S. health care system?

Ms. Cohen: Well, the way the U.S. health care system is now is that you really need to be empowered, and I always say that the days of Dr. Marcus Welby are over. I mean, the fact that a doctor is going to take care of absolutely everything—it just doesn't work that way anymore. Doctors are sort of extremely busy, there are all sorts of time constraints, there are some financial constraints. And you have to be in charge of your own health care. I've learned that through family members with their own health problems. I've learned that through some very complicated pregnancies I had. You need to be a partner with your doctor to get you the best health care. ■

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