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A couple struggling to tell their son that he has Asperger's. A cystic fibrosis patient facing a wrenching choice. Cultural clashes erupting over birth rituals in South America.

These and other health subjects—from Alzheimer's to brain tumors (involving the audience-grabbing procedure known as an awake craniotomy)—were honored at the 2011 Sentinel for Health Awards, held Sept. 27 at the Writers Guild of America, West.

The awards were presented on behalf of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and hosted by the Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the USC Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center.

"Tonight, we honor the producers and writers of the shows on television that get it right," said Martin Kaplan, director of the Lear Center, in his opening remarks, "and are entertaining as they do it."

Sandra de Castro Buffington, the director of the HH&S program, called the evening a "celebration of the best in health and entertainment," and told the assembled writers that "tonight, it's all about you."

"Scriptwriters are the master storytellers of our time," Buffington added, "and the writers we celebrate have helped viewers take a leap on the path to health."

The eight finalists honored were among an initial 26 storylines nominated at the beginning of the awards process and judged by health and entertainment experts. Kaplan announced that climate change would be a new category in next year's awards.

Winning the first-place award in the category of Primetime Drama (Major Storyline) was the NBC series *Parenthood*, for an episode in which a couple, Adam and Kristina Braverman, struggle to tell their son Max that he has Asperger's, a form of autism.

The judges for the Sentinel Awards called the episode, titled "Qualities and Difficulties," an "excellent depiction" and a "great example of a family working together to deal with a very tough issue. [The episode] showed realistic struggles and coping strategies."

In accepting the award, Bridget Carpenter, co-executive producer of *Parenthood* and the episode's writer, told the audience that the storyline was inspired by the real-life challenges concerning one of the members of the show's writing staff and his wife, who have a son with Asperger's. Their honesty about the effort involved in raising a child with autism "made it an incredibly rewarding story to tell," said Carpenter, who added that the episode was a personal favorite and the one she enjoyed writing the most.

Carpenter thanked the show's "tremendous" writers, actors and staff, and then singled out her own mother, Diane, a program specialist for special-needs students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, for being her guiding light.

For herself, Carpenter said, the powerful drama inherent in the issue is distilled in Max's simple question after Adam and Kristina—played by Peter Krause and Monica Potter—stumble a bit in how they tell him.

"Do you guys have Asperger's?" asks Max, who's given a complex, strong portrayal by the young actor Max Burkholder.

The story really hits home, Carpenter said, when his parents tell him that they don't. At that moment, "this boy feels he's all alone."

Finalists in the category for major storyline were *Grey's Anatomy*, for an episode about Alzheimer's written by Brian Tanen, Austin Guzman, Mark Wilding, Debora Cahn, Peter

Nowalk and Bill Harper; and *Private Practice*, for an episode about rape written by Shonda Rhimes.

Taking the first-place award in the category of Primetime Drama (Minor Storyline) was *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC), for an episode titled "Not Responsible" about a cystic fibrosis patient named Ricky who's awaiting a lung transplant. When the hospital team discovers that his girlfriend Julia also has CF, the couple are told that medical protocol prohibits a close relationship between them, since personal contact runs the risk of passing dangerous bacteria to each other. It could be especially deadly to someone like Ricky, who post-transplant must be on a regimen of powerful immunosuppressant drugs and much more likely to get an infection. In one of the episode's critical scenes, the surgeon tells Ricky that it's the girl or the new lungs. In the end, the couple part.

The judges called the show "thought-provoking," and said it tackled the tough choice between living with medical risk and living with fulfillment.

Zoanne Clack, co-executive producer of *Grey's Anatomy*, accepted the Sentinel award on behalf of the writer Debora Cahn, and noted how important it was for TV shows to bring important public health messages to the world, in the most responsible and accurate way as possible.

A finalist in the category for minor storyline was *Private Practice*, for an episode about pediatric brain tumors that was written by Jennifer Cecil.

In the Sentinel Awards category of Global Health Storyline, the ABC series *Off the Map* took first place for an episode titled "It's a Leaf," which dealt with cultural clashes arising from the birthing rituals of the Quechua in South America, mining hazards and the exploitation of hope among terminally ill patients by medical quacks. The judges called the show "compelling."

Focusing on the topic of maternal health, the episode's writer Gabriel Llanas called it a very serious global issue, with 1,500 women dying every day due to preventable complications in childbirth and pregnancy. "It's very special for me to be able to shine some light on this subject," Llanas said.

In the category of Children's Programming, *Sesame Street* (PBS) won a first-place award for an episode written by Christine Ferraro on healthy eating that the judges said "captured all the key nutrition issues"—from the importance of a good breakfast to eating together as a family.

Jane Park, a *Sesame Street* adviser who accepted the award, called it "an amazing honor" and said Cookie Monster sent his regrets over not being able to attend.

In the Telenovela category, the Telemundo serial *El Clon* took the first-place award for an episode about the importance of regular pelvic exams to detect cervical cancer.

"Considering the fact that we reach millions, it's critical for us to use this platform to address quality of life issues," said Telemundo spokesman Victor Franco, who accepted the award on behalf of the writers, Roberto Stopello and Sandra Velasco. The judges said the episode, "Once a Year, for Peace of Mind," highlighted "the importance of being responsible for your health."

The evening ceremonies also saw the appearance of TV legend and benefactor Norman Lear, and the presentation of the 2011 Everett M. Rogers Award for Achievement in Entertainment Education to Esta de Fossard. In addition, Chris Keyser, the new president of the WGA, West, was on hand to say a few words.

Following the presentations for the 2011 Sentinel for Health Awards, the winning writers participated in a panel discussion that offered behind-the-scenes looks about their respective shows and the genesis of some of their TV stories.

Taking part in the conversation were Bridget Carpenter, co-executive producer of *Parenthood* (NBC); Zoanne Clack, co-executive producer of *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC); Jennifer Cecil, co-executive producer of *Private Practice* (ABC); and Gabriel Llanas, a writer for *Off the Map* and now *Private Practice* (ABC).

They were joined by Martin Kaplan, director of the USC Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center, and Sandra de Castro Buffington, director of the Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the Lear Center. HH&S, which hosted the Sentinel Awards, provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for health storylines, including briefings with experts on a wide range of public health topics.

Kaplan, who served as moderator, got things rolling by asking about the need for strong drama being constantly weighed against the medical facts. Can they recall a time when one or the other came out on top?

Llanas talked about one storyline that was part of the *Off the Map* episode that won in this year's global health category, involving trapped miners underground. Originally, Llanas wanted to do a story about illegal gold mining, which he said is a huge problem in South America and a serious health issue because it involved the use of mercury, a potentially toxic metal that is often dumped into drinking and bathing water or is handled directly by the miners.

That story, Llanas said, then evolved into being about workers trapped in a collapsed mine—still a good topic because of the safety hazards that miners face and a subject very much in the news then with the constant media coverage surrounding the Chilean miners. But the story was deemed too “dark” by the powers-that-be, Llanas said, and “nobody wanted to spend an entire hour of primetime television underground in a coal mine.”

On a whim, Llanas said, he re-pitched the story to make it about an abandoned Inca gold mine that was cursed. Throw in some trapped miners and that's how the episode eventually aired on TV. The story changed just a bit, Llanas acknowledged somewhat ruefully.

Clack, who's a doctor, remembered her opposition to part of a *Grey's Anatomy* storyline involving a ferry crash and the near-drowning of one of the main characters, the surgeon Meredith Grey. Clack still shook her head over the fact that, even after undergoing about 24 hours of resuscitation on the show, Meredith was not only extubated (medical-speak for removal of a breathing tube) but she even managed to say the word *extubated*, and was up on her feet doing hospital rounds shortly after.

“I thought that was wrong,” Clack said in a bit of understatement. “And I lost.”

The writers talked about being as accurate as possible, especially when it came to symptoms and treatment, with the simple rule that you just “don't fudge important stuff.”

“To get things right is very important,” Cecil said, citing the *Private Practice* episode that she wrote about brain tumors that was a finalist in the minor storyline category. The patient, a teenager who's an accomplished pianist, undergoes an awake craniotomy in which a patient is conscious and alert during brain surgery. “The procedure itself is very difficult so we wanted to make sure the physicality was presented correctly,” Cecil said.

But when dealing with a topic that's been done on TV before, the writers seemed to agree that the motivation is to “do the unexpected” and put a little topspin on the topic. More important,

Clack said, was the desire to get away from cliches and make stories “more [human] and more real.”

*Grey’s Anatomy* is “an eighth-season show,” she said. “We’re constantly trying to top ourselves.”

And Clack, for one, said her show relied so often on the expertise provided through Hollywood, Health & Society that they’re “on our speed dial.”

Carpenter, who wrote the episode for *Parenthood* about Asperger's that won first-place in the major storyline category, pointed out that although her series is not a medical show, the writers strive for accuracy when it comes to health issues. But despite the running storyline on Asperger’s—a form of autism—she said the show is, at heart, a family drama.

All of the writers expressed a sense of wonder and gratification when viewers respond to a storyline that aired—some information conveyed by a TV show that changed or possibly saved someone’s life. Even more amazing, Cecil said, was the number of fans of American TV shows that she encountered during a recent writers trip to India. Despite the poverty all around them, she said, members of the local community still managed to closely follow television shows and were very familiar with the health issues conveyed in the storylines.

Cecil referred to getting these important health messages out to viewers as “slipping the spinach into the brownies.”

But in the end, with the conversation and the evening winding down, Clack said she was reminded of what her boss on a medical show called *Presidio Med* once told her years ago: “The drama always wins.”

“And I took that to heart,” she said.