

Message from Peter L. Slavin, MD

It was July 2008 when ABC News producer Terry Wrong called the MGH to ask about our possible interest in a documentary at our hospital. This call came as a series titled “Hopkins” was in the midst of its seven-week summer run. “Watch the show for the next couple of weeks,” Terry suggested. “I’ll call you back later.”

We did watch, along with 7 million other viewers each week. And we got a glimpse into the decisions, frustrations, victories, emotions, debates and realities of day-to-day life at another premier academic medical center.

True to his word, Terry called us back, and we began a dialogue that soon expanded to our chiefs, nursing leadership, hospital administration, department heads, residency program directors and lawyers. We spent a great deal of time thinking about and weighing the various risks and benefits of participating in such a long-term, intense project. We talked to people from Johns Hopkins, who had paved the way for this type of hospital documentary series, and from them we heard overwhelmingly positive comments about the experience, the ABC team and the public response to the series.

Ultimately, our decision to participate was based on the incredible opportunity to once again shine a spotlight on the many dimensions of academic medicine, this time in Boston and through the lens of the MGH and our sister institutions, Brigham and Women’s and Children’s hospitals. We concluded that opening up our hospital to ABC would help the public understand why academic medical centers like Mass General matter so much. If we expect the public to support our missions of providing the highest quality care to patients, advancing the frontiers of medical science, teaching future generations of health care providers and improving the health of our communities, then we must have both the willingness and the confidence to open our doors and help demystify this complex calling.

Clearly, however, there is risk in allowing media crews such unfettered access to the inner workings of a hospital that is dedicated to protecting patient privacy and confidentiality. All of the patients and staff who participated did so voluntarily and willingly. We worked out a very detailed agreement and specific consent forms with ABC to ensure that we were taking the necessary steps to respect and protect the privacy of patients, families and staff. The ABC crew members were fully on board with these limits, and on several occasions they went well beyond expectations to make sure that a patient or family member was comfortable with the project.

I know I speak for the entire MGH community in saying that it has been a privilege to be part of such a meaningful and far-reaching project. Throughout this summer, we will see remarkable stories unfold on the television screen as we hear the fears and hopes of patients and families and the thoughts and perspectives of their providers. “Boston Med” is about some extraordinary places where critical decisions are commonplace, where poignant moments abound, where failures can devastate and where triumphs are savored. The stories that emerge from these places are heartwarming, heart wrenching and heartening. And they deserve to be told.

I hope you will watch “Boston Med” this summer, Thursdays at 10 pm eastern/9 pm central, on ABC.

Enjoy,

Peter L. Slavin, MD
MGH President