Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation on Television: 25 years of miracles and misinformation

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Introduction.

In 1996 Diem and colleagues analysed the portrayal of CPR in popular television programs from 1994 and 1995. They concluded that drama programs portray an unrealistic expectation of survival from cardiac arrest. They found that 75% of patients survived the event and 67% appeared to have survived to hospital discharge. In addition, the majority of cardiac arrest events were caused by trauma and 65% involved children, teenagers or young adults.

This study was conducted to investigate if changes in the portrayal of cardiac arrest have occurred over the last 25 years.

Methods.

The author watched all episodes of the following programs:

- Ambulance* season 3 (West-Midlands, UK)
- Ambulance* season 4 (Northwest Ambulance, UK)
- Paramedics* (Victoria, Australia) season 1
- Ambulance Australia* (NSW, Australia) season 1
- Ambulance Australia* (NSW, Australia) season 2
- 9-1-1* season 1
- 9-1-1* season 2

Incidents of CPR were analysed for causes, treatment and outcomes. Cases were included if cardiopulmonary resuscitation was attempted in any form.

Results.

Since 1994, the composition of television programs has changed from exclusively drama programs to a predominance of reality programs.

There were 23 occurrences of CPR in the 56 episodes viewed. CPR cases were more frequent in drama programs than reality programs.

Program	Location	Series	Episodes	Arrests	Survival
Ambulance	West Midlands, UK	3	8	5	0
	Northwest Ambulance, UK	4	4	2	0
Paramedics	Victoria, Australia	1	10	1	0
Ambulance Australia	NSW, Australia	1	8	2	0
	NSW, Australia	2	6	1	1
9-1-1	Los Angeles, CA, USA	1	10	5	4
	Los Angeles, CA, USA	2	10	7	5

A substantial difference was noted in the cause of cardiac arrest in both drama and reality programs compared to real-world experience.

There were eleven episodes of cardiac arrest in 36 episodes of reality programs. The main cause of the arrest was non-medical (55%). Three patients (27%) achieved ROSC at scene and one (9%) was shown to have survived to hospital discharge. In addition, two patients were attended where paramedics considered resuscitation efforts to be futile.

In drama programs there were 12 occurrences of CPR shown in 20 episodes. The main cause of cardiac arrest was non-medical (75%). Nine patients (75%) achieved ROSC at the scene and all nine were shown or implied to have survived to hospital discharge.

Outcomes following CPR between drama and reality programs were significant different ($p=0.02$).

Conclusions.

Drama television programs continue to portray an unrealistic expectation of CPR. Reality programs provided a more realistic portrayal of outcomes following out-of-hospital cardiac arrest, although they still tended to show a distorted proportion of non-medical cardiac arrest cases.