

Racial and gender disparities in the portrayal of lawyers and physicians on television

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SUMMARY

Mass media's portrayal of minorities and women in society has the potential to shape perception and affect behavior. Our objective was to examine minority and gender representation in professional roles as lawyers and physicians on television. We hypothesized that minorities and women are less likely to be represented in these roles on television compared to White men. In addition, we hypothesized that the lower fictional representations of minorities and women as professionals would be mirrored by lower rates of minorities and women in actual legal and medical practice. We analyzed medical and legal primetime dramas featuring lawyers and physicians to determine the race and gender of the lead character(s). The distribution of fictional minority and female professionals was compared to a racial distribution obtained from the 2020 US census, as well as data on the race and gender of lawyers and physicians in practice. Our findings showed fictional lawyers and physicians on television were predominantly White and male. The next most common groups represented were Black lawyers and physicians. There were no major Hispanic or Asian lawyers and only one Hispanic and Asian male physician represented. Women were underrepresented as both lawyers and physicians. When compared to the expected population demographic data from the 2020 census, both racial and gender disparity were noted, with significantly fewer than expected fictional representations of minority and female lawyers and physicians. The racial and gender disparity found with fictional lawyers and physicians mirrored lower numbers of minority and female lawyers and physicians in actual practice.

INTRODUCTION

According to the cultivation theory, there is evidence linking a viewer's media exposure with their social perceptions, including racial and gender attitudes (1,2). Despite numerous new emerging mass media platforms, televised network shows on both cable television (TV) and streaming platforms continue to reach the largest and broadest demographics in terms of age, race, and ethnicity (3). As such, primetime network television programs may play a large role in presenting a reflection of society to society at large. Minorities and women appear to be disproportionately

underrepresented on television (4,5). A recent study showed that women represent 52% of the population but only account for 38% of screen time on television and Hispanics comprise 19% of the population but only account for 5% of screen time (6). The widespread and pervasive nature of televised images may overtly and subliminally contribute to both positive and negative perceptions of societal roles (7,8). Televised social norms also have the potential to become indistinguishable from social reality in peoples' beliefs, particularly if they have no real-life knowledge of or interpersonal experience with that norm (9,10).

Our objective was to examine the numbers of minorities and women portrayed as lawyers and physicians on primetime legal and medical dramas. We selected lawyers and physicians for our analyses since they are quintessential professionals that are easily identifiable. While there are many other high-level professionals, such as businessmen, engineers, and scientists, there is greater variability within these professions and therefore greater difficulty in defining them for the purposes of this study. In addition, the television industry has made both legal and medical dramas well-defined genres. While legal and medical dramas seem ubiquitous on television, the numbers of TV lawyers and doctors are relatively low at any given time, and therefore, data on these fictional characters were combined from multiple time periods. We examined how the percentages of minority and female representation in these professional roles on television compare to the expected percentages based on population demographics from the US census as well as the percentages of minorities and women in actual legal and medical practice in the US. We hypothesized that the numbers of both minority and female representations as lawyers and physicians on primetime US legal and medical dramas would be lower than the numbers for White males relative to population demographics. In addition, we hypothesized that the low fictional numbers for both minority and female lawyers and physicians would be comparable to the lower numbers of actual minorities and women in the legal and medical practice in the US. Our results showed that there were overall lower minority and female representations as lawyers and physicians on TV relative to expected rates based on demographic data, and that fictional lawyers and physicians were predominantly White and male. In addition, the lower occurrence of fictional minority and female lawyers and physicians paralleled the lower occurrence of minority

and female lawyers and physicians in actual practice.

RESULTS

We examined historical data on the race and gender of fictional lawyers ($n = 50$) and physicians ($n = 50$) from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) of primetime legal dramas spanning from 1957 to 2017 and medical dramas spanning from 1961 to 2018 that were televised in the US (Table 1). Because of the overall limited numbers of television lawyers and physicians, we utilized historical data and compared this data to population demographics from the 2020 census. The analyses of legal primetime television shows revealed that 90% of fictional lawyers were White (Figure 1A). The remaining 10% of fictional lawyers were Black, and there were no major Hispanic or Asian lawyers considered in the analysis, which was limited to the top four recurrent major characters in each show. Fictional physicians were 74% White, while 26% of all fictional physicians were minorities, which further split into 22% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 2% Asian (Figure 1B). The percentages of both minority fictional lawyers ($p < 0.001$) and physicians ($p < 0.005$) were significantly lower than expected based on population demographics (Figure 2A).

Similarly, the percentage of both practicing minority lawyers ($p < 0.005$) and physicians ($p < 0.001$) were significantly lower than expected relative to demographics (Figure 2B). Specifically, the percentage of Black lawyers in

practice (5%) was lower than both the percentage of fictional Black lawyers (10%) and expected population demographics of 12.1% (11, 12). The percentage of actual Black physicians in practice (4.7%) was also much lower than expected (13). However, fictional Black physicians at 22% of all TV physicians were the only fictional minority professional group that was represented at higher-than-expected numbers. In comparison, although Hispanics are the largest minority group of the population (18.7%) as of 2020, there were no Hispanic lawyers represented as major characters on television, and only 2% of fictional physicians were Hispanic. The low numbers of Hispanic fictional lawyers and physicians were even lower than the already relatively low numbers of practicing Hispanic lawyers (5%) and physicians (5.8%). While Asians comprise 5.9% of the population in the 2020 census, there were no major Asian fictional lawyers on TV and only one Asian American male fictional physician that was a major recurring character. The lack of any fictional Asian lawyers is comparable to the actual low percentage of Asian lawyers in practice at 2%, which is lower than expected relative to population demographics. However, the percentage of actual practicing Asian physicians (17.1%) is much higher than for the percentage of fictional Asian physicians (2%) as well as percentages expected based on population demographics

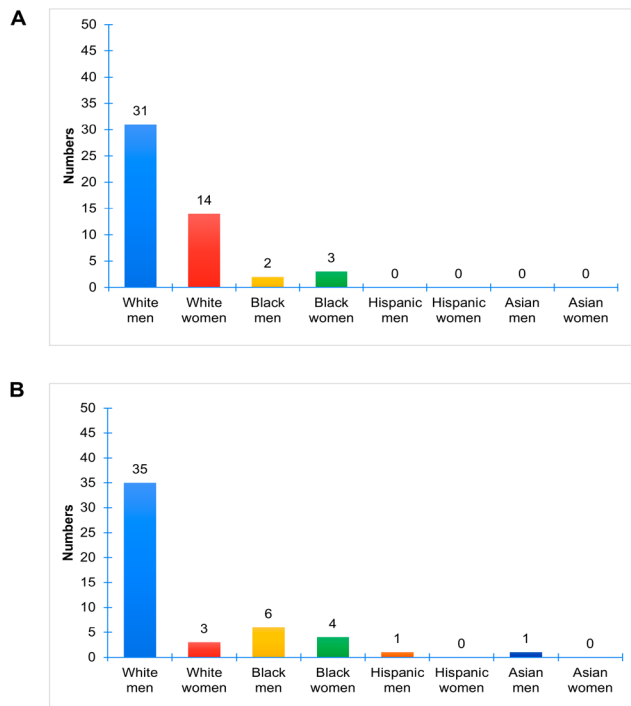


Figure 1. Race and gender of fictional television lawyers and physicians. (A) Distribution of fictional lawyers by race and gender obtained from television legal drama from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) from 1957 to 2017 ($n=50$). (B) Distribution of fictional physicians by race and gender obtained from television medical dramas from IMDb from 1961 to 2018 ($n=50$).

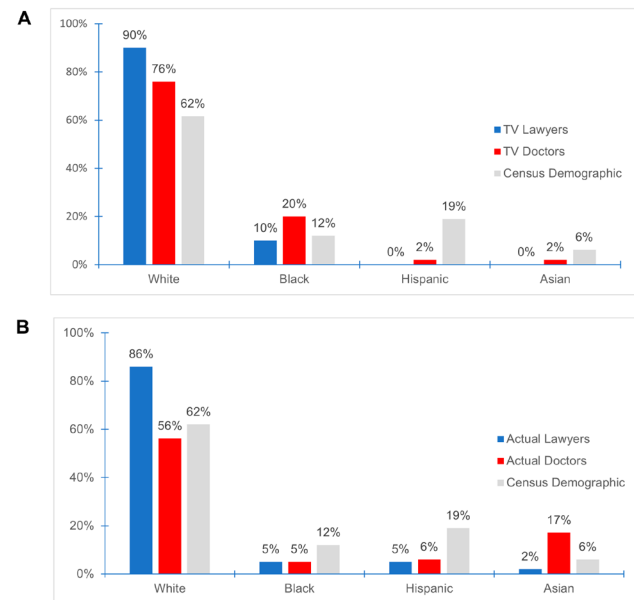


Figure 2. Comparison of racial distribution of fictional and practicing lawyers and physicians to expected demographic racial distributions. (A) The racial distribution of fictional minority lawyers ($p < 0.001$) and physicians ($p < 0.005$) were significantly different compared to expected racial demographic distribution based on data from the 2020 census (11). (B) The racial distribution of practicing lawyers ($p < 0.005$) and the racial distribution of practicing physicians ($p < 0.001$) showed significant differences relative to expected racial distribution data from the 2020 census (12, 13). Statistical tests compared the percentage of observed fictional and practicing lawyers and physicians to expected demographic percentages using the Chi-square test.

(5.9%)

In terms of gender, women were significantly underrepresented as professionals on television relative to men, accounting for 34.0% of fictional lawyers ($p < 0.02$) even though they comprise 51.1% of the population (Figure 3A). The percentage of fictional female physicians was even lower at 14.0% ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 3B). However, the percentage of fictional female lawyers represented on TV at 34.0% was comparable to the percentage of lawyers in practice (37.0%) (Figure 3A), while the percentage of fictional physicians at 14.0% was notably lower than the percent of actual female physicians in practice (36.3%) (Figure 3B). Overall, the percentage of both actual female lawyers in practice ($p < 0.04$) and female physicians in practice ($p < 0.03$) were lower than expected based on population demographics.

DISCUSSION

Fictional minority and female lawyers and physicians were portrayed at significantly lower numbers compared to the expected demographic distribution, with most fictional lawyers and physicians being White and male. There were more fictional Black lawyers and physicians on TV compared to the actual percentages of practicing Black lawyers

and physicians, however, overall, the low percentages of fictional minority lawyers and physicians were similar to the low percentages of both minority and female lawyers and physicians in actual practice. Although we did not specifically examine the race and gender of minor and non-recurring supporting characters on TV shows, it is noteworthy that non-lawyer or non-physician characters such as secretaries, nurses, and cleaning staff were portrayed often by minorities and women. The limitations of this study include the use of historical data from television shows that span many decades during which the actual racial distribution of the country changed with increases in both Hispanic and Asian populations, although the percentage of the Black population remained relatively stable (Figure 4) (11,14).

Images presented on popular media may have significant effects on shaping social knowledge, norms, and expectations. The cultivation theory suggests that social reality is formed not only from life experiences but also from TV or other mass media and that these images contribute to the behavioral models of viewers (15). Previous studies have shown that 75% of White people do not have a significant relationship with a non-White person (16). In the absence of in-person interactions, images presented on screen play a disproportionately greater role in influencing the opinions of the viewer. Negative stereotypes about minority groups become subliminally and powerfully ingrained in all of society, leading to unconscious bias and discrimination from the majority, but also importantly, the erosion of capability and potential from the minority. Thus, how a given minority group is portrayed consistently in mass media may have profound consequences on their social standing and self-esteem (17). A previous study has shown that persons exposed to stereotypical Black characters as criminals in entertainment programs develop negative attitudes about Blacks and even negatively influenced their attitudes about affirmative action policies (18). Theoretically, the patterns of racial representation in mass media are even more likely to impact and potentially imprint on younger viewers who are actively

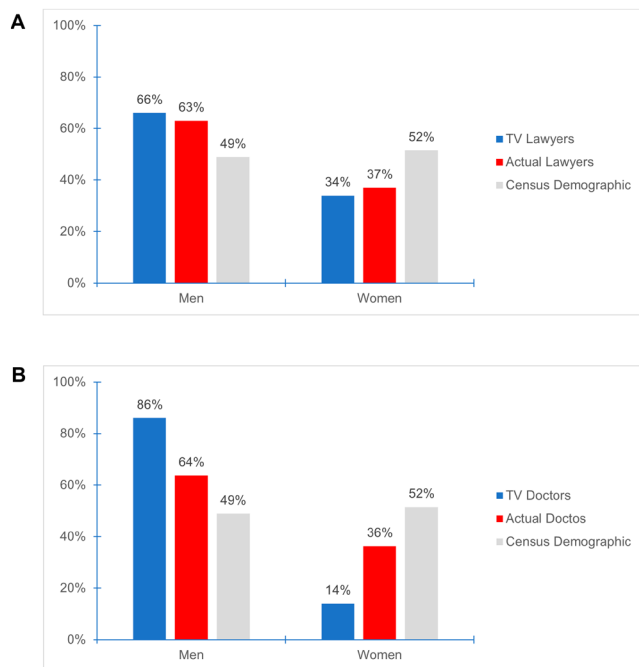


Figure 3. Comparison of gender distribution of fictional and practicing lawyers and physicians to expected demographic gender distributions. (A) The percentage of fictional female lawyers ($p < 0.02$) and actual practicing female lawyers ($p < 0.05$) were significantly underrepresented compared to expected demographic data. (B) The percentage of fictional female physicians ($p < 0.001$) and actual practicing female physicians ($p < 0.05$) were also significantly underrepresented compared to expected demographic distribution data. Statistical tests compared the percentage of observed female fictional and practicing lawyers and physicians to expected demographic percentages using the Chi-square test.

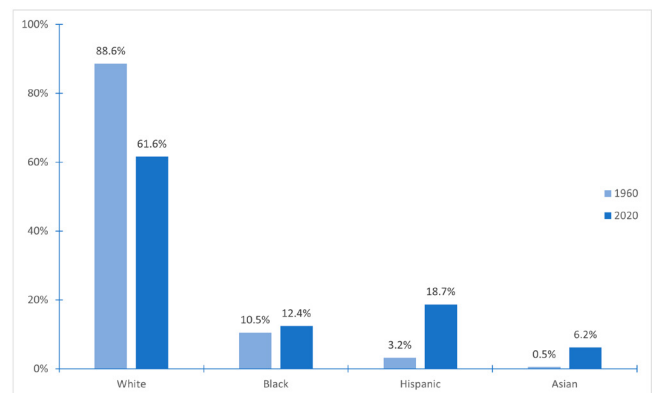


Figure 4. Comparison of US census data for percentages of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American demographics from 1960 and 2020 (11).

forming their own identities and an understanding of the world around them (19).

The recent 2020 census showed notable increases in the minority population compared to previous years particularly for Hispanic and Asian groups (**Figure 4**) (11, 14,20) However, there is continued underrepresentation of all minority groups in both the legal and medical professions. While the percentage of Black Americans at 12.1% of the US population has remained relatively stable, they comprise only 5% of practicing lawyers and 4.7% of practicing physicians. In fact, the percentage of Black lawyers has not changed in a decade, and the percentage of Black male physicians has not changed significantly since 1940 (21). Hispanics are the largest minority group in the US population but are significantly underrepresented in both the legal and medical professions. The percentage of Hispanic lawyers has only increased by 1% over a decade, while the percentage of Hispanic physicians has increased by only 0.3% over a decade (11,12). Asian lawyers are also underrepresented relative to population demographics and the percentage of Asian lawyers has only increased from 1.6% to 2% over a decade (11). Asian physicians in practice (17.1%) are the only professional minority group that is represented at greater than expected rates based on population demographics.

While academic opportunity and financial factors are significant and systemic barriers to becoming a lawyer or a physician, one cannot discount the importance of cultural barriers that arise from the absence of early exposure to a profession as well as a lack of role models that prevent minorities from considering legal or medical careers (22). The paucity of positive media representations combined with consistent negative media depictions of minorities can result in not only external bias against the minority group but also the internalization of stereotypes that hinder career aspirations within the minority group (23).

The importance of increased minority representation is manifold. In the legal system, diversity, including the presence of minority lawyers, is important for attaining broader perspectives and understanding to fairly represent various communities and to prevent racial bias and discrimination. Black defendants are 19% more likely to be offered plea deals that included prison time compared to White defendants and are overrepresented in death penalty cases (24). Increasing minority legal representation among many other systemic changes may aid in reducing racial disparity in the criminal justice system. The benefit of diversifying the legal system extends beyond the justice system, with higher financial returns for corporate legal firms that have higher racial and gender diversity (25). Diversity will benefit in terms of broader expertise and knowledge that will better serve a wider client base and changing demographics.

In the medical field, increased diversity has been correlated with better patient compliance and satisfaction (26). Minority physicians are also more likely to care for underserved patients, closing gaps in health care services

which can improve the overall health of society (27). The recent events during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlight the need for more minority physicians to increase trust and improve care within the minority communities that suffered disproportionately (28). Diversity is not only beneficial to the minority group that is included, but also beneficial for all of society because of the positive impacts on healthcare and economic returns (29).

Real-life mentors and role models would be ideal to increase the number of minority lawyers and physicians. Law firms can sign on to the Mansfield Rule, a program created to provide metrics for legal organizations to increase diversity by including at least 30% minority candidates (women, people of color, LGBTQ, and those with disabilities) for consideration (30). In medicine, the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) instituted guidelines in 2009 to systematically recruit and increase groups "underrepresented in medicine" (URM) (31). However, these structural changes will take time, and the supplemental benefit of fictional role models should not be ignored. The recent increases in the visibility of minority physicians on social media are likely to make some progress with the younger generation, but television still has the potential to influence the most diverse audience and has the greatest potential to rapidly shift the quality of minority representation (32).

Overall, the percentages of fictional and actual female lawyers and physicians were lower than expected based on population demographics, consistent with underrepresentation of women in these professional roles both on TV and in real life. In time, the actual numbers of both female lawyers and physicians are expected to increase as women comprised 54.1% of students in law schools and 53.7% of students in medical school in 2020 (33,34). However, despite the recent female majority in law and medical schools, there is still a significant disparity in the number of women in leadership positions in both the legal and medical professions. As with minority lawyers and physicians, systemic inequalities favoring males over females will need to be addressed to overcome the disparity in female leadership in both law and medicine, but greater fictional representation of women as both lawyers and physicians, especially in leadership roles, may aid in cracking the glass ceiling.

Potential future investigations may involve the examination of minority and gender representations of professional figures in online media such as YouTube and TikTok compared to the more traditional medium of TV. Many people, particularly the younger generation, are spending greater amounts of time on these new media outlets, so these media have the potential to reach wider audiences and increase diverse representation (35). However, because of the innumerable offerings on these newer media outlets, there is potential for less shared information and lesser impact compared to traditional TV. In fact, the diversity of offerings has the potential to segregate viewers into niches rather than broadening their exposure and perspective.

In conclusion, both minorities and women, with the exception of Black male physicians, are portrayed less often as lawyers and physicians on television compared to White men, and these lower numbers of fictional representations were reflected in the lower numbers of actual minority lawyers and physicians in practice. It is the authors' view that biases do not occur in a vacuum but are ingrained in people through both lived experiences and secondary exposures to socially shared stereotypes in mass media. The positive and quality representation of minorities and women on television in high social and professional status could mitigate these biases and engender improved societal values for everyone.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main character(s) of primetime televised legal and medical shows were analyzed utilizing data from IMDb with genre limited to dramas. In shows with ensemble casts, analyses were limited to a maximum of four main characters defined as the top recurrent characters on IMDb. The study was limited to only primetime programming produced on network television where legal or medical personnel and issues played a significant role in the show and was limited to shows that had been televised for at least three seasons. Although both legal and medical dramas appear commonplace, the numbers of actual shows are fairly low, and thus historical data for these shows were also utilized in the study. This comprised a total of 20 legal dramas spanning from 1957 to 2017 and 21 medical dramas spanning from 1961 to 2018. The final sample included a total of 50 lawyers and 50 physicians. Each television character was coded for ethnicity as White, Black, Hispanic, or Asian by the two authors. The gender of the main character(s) was also noted. The racial and gender distribution of fictional lawyers and physicians was compared to the expected rates of minority and female lawyers and physicians based on demographic data from the 2020 census (10). In addition, data on fictional TV lawyers and physicians were also compared to the actual racial and gender distribution of lawyers and physicians in practice based on data obtained from the American Bar Association and Association of American Medical Colleges, respectively (11,12). The Chi-square test was used for all statistical analyses. The distribution of fictional physicians and lawyers by race were compared to expected racial distribution of population based on data from the 2020 census. The distribution of fictional female versus male physicians and lawyers were compared to expected rates based on gender distribution in the population from the 2020 census.

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APPENDIX

A

Year	Show	Gender	Race	Character
1957	Perry Mason	M	W	Perry Mason
1961	The Defender	M	W	Kenneth Preston
1975	Kate McShane	F	W	Kate McShane
1986	L.A. Law	F	W	Ann Kelsey
1986	L.A. Law	M	W	Doug Brackman
1986	L.A. Law	M	W	Stuart Markowitz
1986	L.A. Law	M	W	Arnie Becker
1990	Law & Order	M	W	Jack McCoy
1990	Law & Order	M	W	Adam Schiff
1991	I'll Fly Away	M	W	Forrest Bedford
1992	Matlock	M	W	Ben Matlock
1995	JAG	F	W	Sarah MacKenzie
1995	JAG	M	W	Harmon Rabb Jr
1997	The Practice	F	W	Ellenor Frutt
1997	The Practice	M	B	Eugene Young
1997	The Practice	F	W	Lindsey Dole
1997	The Practice	M	W	Bobby Donnell
1997	Ally McBeal	F	B	Renee Raddick
1997	Ally McBeal	M	W	John Cage
1997	Ally McBeal	M	W	Richard Fish
1997	Ally McBeal	F	W	Ally McBeal
2001	The Guardian	M	W	Burton Fallin
2001	The Guardian	M	W	Alvin Masterson
2001	The Guardian	M	W	Nick Fallin
2004	Boston Legal	M	W	Paul Lewiston
2004	Boston Legal	F	W	Shirley Schmidt
2004	Boston Legal	M	W	Danny Crane
2004	Boston Legal	M	W	Alan Shore
2007	Damages	M	w	Tom Shayes
2007	Damages	F	W	Ellen Parsons
2007	Damages	F	W	Patty Hewes
2009	The Good Wife	F	W	Diane Lockhart
2009	The Good Wife	M	W	Cary Agos
2009	The Good Wife	M	W	Will Gardner
2009	The Good Wife	F	W	Alicia Florrick
2011	Suits	M	W	Harvey Specter
2011	Suits	M	W	Mike Ross
2011	Franklin and Bash	M	W	Jared Franklin
2011	Franklin and Bash	M	W	Damien Carp
2011	Franklin and Bash	M	W	Stanton Infeld
2011	Franklin and Bash	M	W	Peter Bash
2014	How to Get Away with Murder	F	B	Annalise Keating
2015	Better Call Saul	M	W	Howard Hamlin
2015	Better Call Saul	F	W	Kim Wexler
2015	Better Call Saul	M	W	Jimmy McGill
2016	Goliath	M	W	Billy McBride
2017	The Good Fight	M	B	Julius Cain
2017	The Good Fight	F	W	Rose Leslie
2017	The Good Fight	F	B	Lucca Quinn
2017	The Good Fight	F	W	Diane Lockhart

B

Year	Show	Gender	Race	Character
1961	James Kildare	M	W	James Kildare
1961	Ben Casey	M	W	Ben Casey
1966	Star Trek	M	W	James McCoy
1969	Marcus Welby	M	W	Marcus Welby
1972	M.A.S.H	M	W	BJ Hunnicutt
1972	M.A.S.H	M	W	Hawkeye Pierce
1972	Emergency!	M	W	Kelley Brackett
1976	Quincy	M	W	Quincy
1979	Trapper John	M	W	George Gates
1979	Trapper John	M	W	Stanley Riverside
1979	Trapper John	M	B	Justin Jackson
1979	Trapper John	M	W	Trapper John
1982	St. Elsewhere	M	W	Victor Ehrlich
1982	St. Elsewhere	M	W	Wayne Fiscus
1982	St. Elsewhere	M	B	Phillip Chandler
1982	St. Elsewhere	M	W	Mark Craig
1989	Doogie Howser	M	W	Doogie Howser
1990	Northern Exposure	M	W	Joel Fleishman

1993	Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman	F	W	Michaela Quinn
1993	Diagnosis: Murder	M	W	Mark Sloane
1994	E.R.	M	W	Doug Ross
1994	E.R.	M	W	John Carter
1994	E.R.	M	B	Peter Benton
1994	E.R.	M	W	Mark Greene
1994	Chicago Hope	M	W	Jeffrey Geiger
1994	Chicago Hope	M	W	Aaron Schutt
1994	Chicago Hope	M	H	Phillip Waters
1994	Chicago Hope	M	W	Billy Crook
2003	Nip/Tuck	M	W	Christian Troy
2003	Nip/Tuck	M	W	Sean McNamara
2004	House	M	B	Eric Foreman
2004	House	M	W	James Wilson
2004	House	M	W	Robert Chase
2004	House	M	W	Greg House
2005	Grey's Anatomy	M	W	Derek Shepherd
2005	Grey's Anatomy	F	W	Meredith Grey
2005	Grey's Anatomy	F	B	Miranda Bailey
2005	Grey's Anatomy	M	B	Richard Webber
2015	Chicago Med	M	W	Will Halstead
2015	Chicago Med	M	A	Ethan Choi
2015	Chicago Med	M	W	Daniel Charles
2015	Chicago Med	F	B	Sharon Goodwin
2017	The Good Doctor	M	B	Marcus Andrews
2017	The Good Doctor	M	W	Aaron Glassman
2017	The Good Doctor	F	B	Claire Brown
2017	The Good Doctor	M	W	Shaun Murphy
2018	New Amsterdam	M	W	Max Goodwin
2018	New Amsterdam	F	W	Lauren Bloom
2018	New Amsterdam	F	B	Helen Sharp
2018	New Amsterdam	M	B	Floyd Reynolds

Table 1. List of TV legal (A) and medical (B) shows and characters. For gender: M = male and F = female. For race: B = Black, W = White, H = Hispanic, and A = Asian.

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