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AIDS drives plots on TV

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By Steve Sternberg, USA TODAY

On the morning of Sept. 13, the people settling into seats on the set of *The Price Is Right* in CBS' Television City won't be a studio audience. They'll be some of the most creative producers and writers in Hollywood.

Instead of Bob Barker, they'll meet an HIV-positive magazine editor; a recovering, HIV-positive methamphetamine addict; and a mother whose 18-year-old son learned he was HIV positive when he tried to join the Air Force.

If the producers are moved by the stories they hear, they may transform scenes from these lives into story lines for any one of a number of shows on CBS and the CW Network, from *Without a Trace* to *America's Next Top Model*.

"Ultimately, our job is to tell compelling emotional stories," says executive producer Jan Nash of *Without a Trace*. "We'll take a good idea from anyone." Last year Nash and executive producer Greg Walker came away from a previous session with a missing-person plot inspired by Jennifer Jako, a married, HIV-positive filmmaker who wanted to become pregnant.

The upcoming CBS meeting reflects a broad shift in the way health experts convey information to the American public on a range of diseases, particularly AIDS. They no longer rely solely on preachy public service ads popping up at odd hours on television and on billboards: "*This is your brain on drugs.*" Today, health messages are routinely "embedded" into story lines of TV's most popular entertainment shows, in much the same way that marketers prominently place products such as beer and designer labels on shows.

Global collaborations among government, public health organizations and media companies have turned the entertainment industries on several continents into one of the most powerful public health communications tools of the 21st century. And the proponents of these "entertainment education" networks — including big players such as CBS and Viacom with its cable stations MTV and BET — aren't limiting themselves to radio and TV.

"The goal is not to be TV-centric, but to get the message out through the Internet, texting

and mobile TV — in certain parts of the world mobile TV is racing," says Bill Roedy, vice chairman of MTV Networks and chairman of the Global Media AIDS Initiative.

The consortium was created by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in 2005, a year after U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan called for more media participation in AIDS prevention.

Next week in Toronto at the 16th International Conference on AIDS, Roedy, Kaiser and actor/activist Richard Gere will showcase a cluster of major media partnerships, involving some of the biggest entertainment companies in the USA, the Caribbean, Africa, India, Russia and Ukraine.

"We've committed to airing a 30-second ad every hour in the broadcast day and producing programming packages, (copy)right free, that we will exchange among ourselves," says Allyson Leacock, general manager of the Caribbean Broadcasting Corp. in Barbados. "We'll also have AIDS messages embedded in our broadcasting."

Kaiser and MTV will exploit the theatrical backdrop of the AIDS meeting itself, with its sober science, street theater and protests, Roedy says. The music network will launch a competition called "fortyeightfest." Eight teams of young filmmakers will be given two days to write, edit and produce short AIDS-awareness films that will be viewed and judged during the conference. The network will film a documentary about the contest and broadcast it on MTV networks with a celebrity host.

### **A plan born of controversy**

The popularization of AIDS prevention today is the product of two decades of controversy. Flash back 20 years: The epidemic is spreading, and health officials are struggling to find a prevention strategy that works. Politicians are skittish about promoting condoms, and the public is not only scared but confused about whether shared toilet seats and water glasses pose a risk.

To counter misinformation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1987 launched a campaign called "America Responds to AIDS." It was best known for two things: former surgeon general C. Everett Koop's controversial mailing of an AIDS brochure to 110 million American households and an ad that famously shows a young man pulling on a sock, an obvious metaphor for a condom.

Even as activists loudly criticized the CDC's constraints, the agency's officials were quietly debating whether to try a different strategy: a partnership with Hollywood. "There was general interest but concern, too," says Charles Salmon, dean of communication at Michigan State University and an architect of the CDC communications strategy. "The idea of a scientific agency partnering with the glitz and glamour of Hollywood was a little disconcerting."

The CDC also did not want to be viewed as Big Brother, a heavy-handed government

agency seeking to subvert freedom of speech. Ultimately, Salmon says, CDC officials decided that HIV was so serious that they should move forward, but "without trying to press an agenda."

The agency ultimately financed several shows, including MTV's first foray into AIDS prevention, *Smart Sex*, produced by Linda Ellerbee. In an early success, CDC officials persuaded producers of the NBC hospital drama *ER* to place a condom poster on the set as a roundabout way of getting the AIDS-prevention message on TV.

Over time, the agency's collaborations with Hollywood worked out so well that three years ago the CDC provided the University of Southern California with a \$300,000 grant for the Norman Lear Center for Hollywood, Health & Society, an amount that nearly doubled this year with funding from the National Cancer Institute. Liz Friedman, a co-producer for the Fox drama *House*, says she relied heavily on the center for an episode about a flamboyant, HIV-positive gay man with a mysterious infection. "I asked them about everything, from what happens when a health worker is exposed to HIV to what four drugs should be in my patient's cocktail."

Tom Valente, a Southern Cal public health expert with a doctorate in communication, says the center also studies how audiences respond to the messages embedded in popular television shows.

"We know a lot more now about what works and what doesn't work," he says.

Exploiting TV makes public health sense, says Drew Altman, president of Kaiser, which laid much of the groundwork for the global partnerships and organizes the briefings for CBS and other networks.

"More than a decade ago," he says, "we did survey after survey showing the media were the No. 1 source of medical information in this country and around the world, especially for young people."

### **Consider the numbers**

Researchers found that one *ER* scene on the sexually transmitted human papilloma virus boosted awareness about the virus among the show's millions of regular viewers from 24% to 47%, according to a study in 1997 by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The story of HIV-positive physician assistant Jeanne Boulet, played by Gloria Reuben, captured viewers' imaginations, too, Altman says. "We discovered the most interesting story line wasn't the love affair between George Clooney and Julianna Margulies (who played Dr. Douglas Ross and nurse Carol Hathaway)," he says. "It was Jeanne Boulet."

With its overlay of tragedy and social stigma, HIV might seem to be anything but appealing TV, but scriptwriters say it's made to order. "We're naturally drawn toward social-justice issues, especially ones that have an emotional component to them," says

Walker, of *Without a Trace*. "When you're dealing with HIV and pregnancy, you have a story that's emotionally volatile."

In developing countries, TV and radio soap operas — some produced with U.S. funding — are widely used to convey health information. "Soap operas can be useful for showing the human face of AIDS, developing sympathy for people with AIDS rather than writing them off," says Jane Bertrand, of the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, which oversees projects in 30 countries.

In South Africa, Bertrand says, a popular soap called *Tsha-Tsha* (for cha-cha) used ballroom dance as the setting for a prime-time story about "an absolutely gorgeous" woman whose boyfriend returns with the news that he's infected, forcing her to confront her own dilemmas: Should she get tested? If she's positive, should she say so?

Here's a story that might pique the interest of the CBS producers meeting on Sept. 13: Teresa Brown of Detroit will tell them what it's like to have a son diagnosed with HIV. Marteniz, now 27, was 18 when he learned he was positive from the test he took to enlist in the Air Force. Brown's support for her son didn't waver. "If you're living with a child with HIV, get the education you need to help your child," she'll tell them.

When she reported to the juvenile detention center where she worked at the time, she began to offer support to the troubled inmates. "I did for those kids in juvenile what I did for my own son. That's what I wanted to do. That's what I needed to do. I couldn't have been a mother if I didn't."