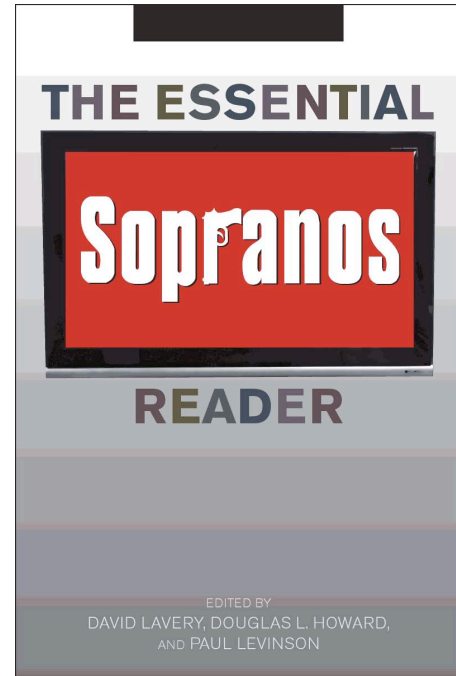


Dianna L. Rivers

Hospital Scenes, Nursing, and Healthcare in *The Sopranos*

Apart from medical series such as *ER*, few dramas have ever featured as many hospital scenes as *The Sopranos*. Considering the amount of violence in its stories, it is perfectly logical, even inevitable, that such scenes occur. However, *The Sopranos* went way beyond the expected clichés and instead used medical scenes as a vehicle for the psychological development of key characters and for expressing stinging commentary about our healthcare system in the United States.



This essay will analyze how medical scenes in the series give impetus to the drama and its social satire. As a professor of nursing with years of prior experience as a hospital nurse and administrator, I can well explain what is actually happening in these scenes, assess their degree of realism, and compare and contrast real life with the *Sopranos* version of institutional healing. From the stitching of employees' wounds to the solving of corporate worries about how to pay for healthcare and insurance, the content of *The Sopranos* consistently delves into territory of exceptional applicability to life outside the gangster sphere.

In considering the series overall, it is remarkable that at least 14 of 86 episodes have one or more nurse characters, and at least 24 have one or more medical doctors.¹ In addition, there are medical technicians, orderlies, candy strippers, nursing home directors, hospital administrators, and others peripheral to healthcare, plus the omnipresent psychiatrists (whose central role in the series is beyond the scope of our strictly medical perspective in this article.) Hospitals

and nursing homes are among the most prevalent sites for scenes in *The Sopranos* (probably ranking below only bars, restaurants, homes, and vehicles.) The medical world is a milieu continuously intersecting the mob world. No gangster in this series can go very long without needing medical attention or witnessing medical attention being received by his peers.

Bullets, fists, and other weapons lead to a great many of the medical scenarios, as would be expected in a Mafia drama, but illness also plays a major part. From the beginning of the series, in addition to the presence of rampant mental disorders, a pall of physical illness hangs over everyone. Cancer is the most prevalent fear. The Don of the New Jersey family, Jackie Aprile, suffers from cancer at the outset in the well-titled "Denial, Anger, Acceptance" (1.3) and succumbs to it by the fourth episode. This occurrence serves notice to the viewer right away that this is not the typical gangster series most people anticipated. Even primary characters are not going to be spared the ravages of disease or infirmity, no matter who they are. The writers' choice of cancer over other diseases adds to the air of deadliness poisoning life in the Sopranos' world. The metaphorical implications are not to be missed either. The mob is a cancer upon society, and the mobsters constitute a cancer upon one another.

Cancer reappears in the fifth installment of the third season, striking two characters in one episode. "Another Toothpick" (xxx) —the title refers to a slang term for a cancer patient who is wasting away—first gives us a hospital scene courtesy of violence. When crazy Mustang Sally batters an Aprile cousin, Bryan Spatafore, with a golf club, the victim ends up in the hospital, and Tony Soprano ends up having to order a retaliation hit. The hit man he hires, Bobby Bacala, Sr., happens to have lung cancer and dies of a coughing attack while driving his getaway car. We cannot help being struck by the irony of cancer beating bullets or car crashes to claim its gangster victims. Cancer attempts to take, in addition, one of the series' most important supporting characters, Uncle Junior. In this same episode, at a clinic where the nurses appear unflappable in the face of Junior's crude

sexist come-ons, Junior announces to Tony that he has “the Big Casino,” a euphemism based on the shared first letter of the words “cancer” and “casino.” But more philosophically the metaphor reflects Junior’s worldview in which life and death are seen as a gamble or a gambling enterprise. A longtime professional operator of illegal gambling rackets, Junior gains some feeling of control over his uncontrollable health situation by using this language. On the other hand, Junior is well aware that other people may not have an adequate appreciation of his courage in facing this situation. He thus orders Tony to promise not to tell anyone else. If they know you are sick, Junior explains, “they look at you differently” and treat you as a “nonentity,” an insightful remark, expressing perfectly the attitude that too many Americans have toward illness and the ill.

Two episodes later, after Tony has violated Junior’s directive by telling his sister about the cancer (xxxx), we witness Junior’s cancer surgery. The operation scene is unusual in one respect: the FBI is present. Or are they? Junior is already under anesthesia when the scene begins, and it is equally plausible that we are seeing Junior’s dream version of what is happening. In certain hospitals, it is standard policy to have as many as three police officers present when a known criminal is receiving treatment. They might stand guard outside the operating room, rather than being inside. The FBI’s showing up would be exceptional, but not an unbelievable stretch in the case of a patient with Junior’s criminal notoriety. It is also hard to judge the likelihood of this being a dream because *The Sopranos* already had an established practice of inserting dream sequences without explanation. Adding to the ambiguity is the fact that this episode was scripted by a different writer than that of the totally realistic episode “Another Toothpick” and hence does not necessarily follow the same style of story-telling.

The title “Second Opinion” (xxx) refers, as we discover a bit later in the script, to Tony’s suggestion that Junior inquire with another doctor about the advantages and disadvantages of chemotherapy. Suspicious of Tony, Junior tries repeatedly to get his

doctor's advice after the initial round of chemo, but cannot get the busy physician, named Dr. John Kennedy, to return his phone calls. The doctor is not too busy to play golf, however, and he soon has the surprise of encountering Tony and his enforcer Furio on the links. Once Furio has finished "educating" Kennedy about the virtues of returning calls, Junior has no more trouble getting a consultation. Many a viewer of the series must have gotten some vicarious satisfaction out of that scene. Not everyone has a Furio on hand to get their doctor's attention, of course, even if we all secretly wish we did.

Hospital rooms are a natural venue for dramatic scenes, but again *The Sopranos* often thwarts expectations and emphasizes unanticipated irony. "Employee of the Month" (3.4) is a perfect example, an episode in which Tony's psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, becomes the victim of a violent sexual assault and has to be hospitalized. The writers of any other dramatic series or movie would surely have found it irresistible to include a major scene in which Tony visits Melfi in the hospital and vows to take revenge on her attacker. But not in this series. Irony piles upon irony as Tony finds himself obligated in this episode to go to the hospital, not to see Melfi, but to visit his sister Janice after she has gotten herself slightly injured in an almost comically stupid confrontation with Russian gangsters following her harebrained theft of Svetlana Kirilenko's false leg. Not only does this obligatory hospital visit irritate Tony for wasting his time, but it essentially replaces the big dramatic scene that will never happen as Tony remains totally ignorant of Melfi's victimization.

Other hospital and medical scenes pepper numerous episodes with irony, most frequently resulting in unforeseen consequences contradicting even good intentions. Tony gets his mother Livia into a first-rate nursing home for her own good, and she responds by plotting to kill him. Tony receives excellent new medication that stops his panic attacks, and it renders him impotent ("xxxxx," xxx). Junior gets a lucky break when he is released from prison for medical reasons, but he immediately finds himself under house arrest—and has to run his rackets from his doctor's office, as if it were a natural place from

which to fleece people. Christopher suffers no repercussions when he treats girlfriend Adriana like dirt, but as soon as he apologizes and proposes marriage he gets shot in an ambush at a diner and ends up hospitalized for days (xxxxx). Dr. Melfi exerts so much effort trying to help Tony with his panic affliction that she winds up on medication and alcohol to calm her own nerves. Capo Gigi Cestone has no trouble dodging bullets, but in the middle of the third season dies on the toilet from a heart attack ("He is Risen," 3.8). Tony develops an affection for a horse, treating her with kindness, and it ends up costing him a fortune in unpaid veterinarian bills. The often-violent Ralphie undergoes a redemptive experience when he sees his son Justin suffering in the hospital from an accident that Ralphie interprets as God punishing the boy for Ralphie's sins—and naturally, the newly reformed gangster gets whacked for his trouble before the episode is over ("Whoever Did This," 4.9). Silvio Dante has the good fortune to be promoted to temporary boss during Tony's hospitalization and he gives it his best effort, with the result that within days Silvio is taken out of his home on a stretcher from all the stress of leadership ("Mayham," 6.3). After Tony's mistress Valentina accidentally catches her clothes on fire while bothering to cook an omelet for Tony, he takes her to the hospital where, as she lies cringing from second-degree burns, he crudely offers to buy her a wig ("The Test Dream," 5.11). And so it goes for episode after episode, with medical scenes repeatedly demonstrating with vividness the axiom that no good deed goes unpunished in the Soprano world.

America's health insurance crisis is another focus of *The Sopranos*. With 47 million Americans uninsured, and many millions more underinsured, usually because they cannot afford the premiums, the public is intensely interested in this issue. Per capita, the United States is currently saddled with "the most expensive health care system in the world."² The gangsters in *The Sopranos* are mostly uninsured as well, except for a few at the top. Evidently, insurance companies see them as a high risk for some reason. So, just like General Motors, the mob pays its own medical expenses out-of-pocket,

which is the embodiment of the free market at work. We see many scenes in which antagonisms between mobsters reach a fever pitch because of insurance issues, of all things.

For example, in Season Six, a tough confrontation between New York gangster Phil Leotardo and Tony erupts when Phil cuts five no-show jobs held at the Tidelands Construction Project by Tony's people. Why is Tony so upset over loss of these few jobs? He explains it succinctly: "I got captains lookin' at me to deliver those no-show jobs on account of the health insurance." "Health care costs these days . . . ," Silvio chimes in. It is impossible to imagine Humphrey Bogart or Edward G. Robinson complaining about such a subject in gangster movies of old, but the mobsters of *The Sopranos* have the modern concern of healthcare on their radar, just like the viewers at home. Phil, by the way, should have watched out for his own medical coverage; in the very next episode he is stricken by a heart attack that will lay him up for six months.

Sometimes insurance is the only thing on Tony's mind. When Ralphie is devastated by his son's brain injury and comes to Tony's office weeping uncontrollably ("Whoever Did This," 4.9), Tony seeks to offer comfort. The only thing that Tony can think of saying to him: "Covered by the Sheetrock and Plasterers Union, right?"

Another telling example: in "Amour Fou" (3.12), Furio, the Sicilian assassin, takes a bullet to the leg and is in need of immediate surgery. Instead of rushing him to the emergency room of a hospital, Tony phones the urologist Dr. Ira Freid—a frequent participant in Soprano-sponsored poker games—who is busy filming a television commercial for erectile dysfunction treatments. Why, Freid asks, don't you just take Furio to the E.R. instead of calling me to come perform back-room surgery on him? No green card, replies Tony. However, in the doctor's commercial, we hear the doctor clearly emphasize that "erectile dysfunction treatment is covered by most medical plans." In other words, in America many persons can get Viagra reimbursement, but others may not get surgery to save a leg paid for.

We find out how much the Mafia thinks hospital stays cost in the episode "Members Only" (6.1). As the result of a misunderstanding with some thugs in Phil's crew, Hesh Rabkin's son-in-law Eli gets beaten up and hit by a car. Tony and his boys visit him in the hospital. We see that Eli has his head in a device known as a Stryker halo, indicating neck and skull injuries and possibly a broken jaw. He also has a leg in traction, probably for a broken femur. Christopher notices a Foley urinary catheter hooked up to Eli, who also has internal bleeding. Tony has to have another confrontational meeting with Phil—not because he cares much about Eli, but because the seriousness of the injuries means medical expenses have to be negotiated. Phil, acting as if he worked for Aetna, tries to lowball Tony by offering \$25,000. Tony, acting as if he worked for a torts law firm, demands compensation for everything on his list—"bleeding internally, pain, suffering." Accordingly, Phil doubles his offer to \$50,000, which Tony deems fair and accepts. Bad move on Tony's part! In today's world, \$50,000 might pay for a week's stay in the Intensive Care Unit, nothing more. Eli's total medical bills, plus missed work income, would likely add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars beyond what Tony settled for.

Everyone in the Sopranos' sphere seems to use an enormous amount of medical care. Consider all the health issues confronted just in the episode "Irregular Around the Margins" (5.5). For starters, Tony discovers moles on his forehead and shoulder—potentially dangerous for having irregular margins—and must have outpatient surgery. This has to be done on the sly, however; echoing Junior's thoughts in a similar situation ("xxxx," xxx), Tony muses that "People hear you have cancer, they start to bury you already." Meanwhile, Adriana starts having stomach trouble, apparently from the stress the FBI is putting on her. She has to go to the doctor, who orders tests expected to confirm a diagnosis of Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Because of that, says Adriana, she will probably be prescribed Prozac and perhaps other medications as well. Boyfriend Christopher, a drug addict currently in rehab, is jealous; in another typical bit of irony, he envies her for

getting drugs for a tummy ache while he can only get oil of clove for his excruciating toothache. And before the night is over, Tony, with Adriana in the passenger seat, crashes and flips his SUV on the highway. Both are taken to the E.R., and although Tony is released almost unharmed, Adriana has extensive injuries all over her body and must remain hospitalized for some time. All told, one bad day has presumably produced medical bills burning up more money than the average American family makes in a year.

Luckily, Tony has the highly valued health insurance coverage the majority of his associates and employees lack. In fact, he has two policies, which is a wise decision considering that most health insurance policies in the U.S. have a cap on lifetime benefits paid to the insured person, and that cap can be quite low. We find out about this in Season Six when Tony is hospitalized for a long time after being gut shot by a confused Uncle Junior. In a memorable scene, the recuperating Tony gets out of a sick bed, with his IV pole in one hand and a cigar in the other, and goes outside the hospital to have yet another nasty confrontation with Phil. As in the past, Tony and Phil are risking gang war over an insurance policy. It seems that while Tony was comatose, Phil agreed to sell Barone Sanitation, a company in which Tony owns a part interest. Although Tony couldn't care less about the waste disposal business, he is furious at the prospective loss of his W-2 from Barone because "Barone is my secondary insurance carrier." Phil has to back down, and eventually gets his boss Johnny Sack to agree to a compromise that keeps Tony insured. Anyone like Tony facing a long convalescence could be financially doomed without secondary insurance.

The entire story arc about Tony's hospitalization after getting shot is filled with medical drama. Covering three episodes—"Join the Club" (6.2), "Mayham" (6.3), and "The Fleishy Part of the Thigh" (6.4)—this arc makes the most of the hospital setting and its life-or-death crises in order to plumb in greater depth than ever before the relationships of the series' major characters.

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In "Join the Club," the comatose Tony dreams he is someone named Kevin Finnerty, who has lost his wallet along with his identity on a business trip. As the unconscious Tony undergoes treatment and experiences pain, he imagines Finnerty having comparable travails. Tony gets poked by doctors, and Finnerty falls down the stairs; Tony gets a battery of tests, and Finnerty gets diagnosed as having Alzheimer's. Then, in a moment of convergence, Tony/Finnerty sees a helicopter's searchbeam focusing down on him. In a beautiful segue, the searchbeam becomes a surgical light. In a hospital bed, Tony is waking up and having convulsions at the same time. The activity of the people around him may appear frantic at first to the observer, but the look of calmness on the faces of the doctors and nurses in contrast to the look of panic on the faces of the family members is a realistic touch. Able to speak at last, Tony's first words are not the expected "Where am I?", but rather the unexpected "Who am I? Where am I going?"—philosophical questions, informing us of the existential themes that will serve as undercurrents throughout the upcoming story line.

As news of Tony's awakening from his coma spreads from the Intensive Care Unit (I.C.U.) to the outer rooms, we perceive a hierarchy in evidence. Two families, blood and Mafia, are both present but not together at first. The biological family is the inner circle, permitted to surround the bed of the patient; the mob family is the outer circle, unacknowledged as family as far as the hospital is concerned. It is amusing to see big, tough gangsters ordered around by tiny nurses who make them obey regulations about visiting hours and seating arrangements. The mob family has been relegated to the waiting room and must await news from a member of the blood family. A division of duties between the two families also exists. Food and communication are handled by the blood family, whereas transportation is handled by the mobsters. Assignments are handed out by Carmela, who has taken charge.

The mobsters are visibly uneasy with this arrangement and soon begin jockeying for power. Silvio, temporarily rising to the boss

position in "Mayham," immediately supplies Carmela with substantial cash, for which she is appreciative. She informs Silvio that the money is definitely needed because Tony's health insurance "does not pay for physical therapy," exactly the sort of information most people do not know about their own coverage. Silvio also tells Carmela that she can expect a "significant package" of funds from Paulie and Vito as well. Unbeknownst to Silvio, that weasely duo has little intention of doing so,, but they finally come across with the money anyhow when they realize that Tony is going to live and will be highly displeased if they have shortchanged his wife.

Tony's recuperation, however, takes an unfortunate setback and he is put back on the respirator. More surgeries ensue as Tony faces danger from sepsis (infection) and brain damage. A surgical specialist, Dr. Plepler, arrives to examine Tony and assumes, wrongly, that a certain Dr. Teshler made rounds and saw him earlier that day. When Plepler asks Carmela what Teshler's verdict was, she complains that he never showed up. Plepler, although surprised, pooh-poohs it, saying oh, "no matter." That is another realistic touch, depicting how doctors are quick to smooth things over with the patient's family members. The ploy works on Carmela but fails to impress her daughter, who had once interned in an I.C.U. and cannot understand why her mother is so deferential toward the "rock star" surgeon, reflecting perhaps a generational difference in attitudes toward the profession.

Plepler does boast about the effectiveness of his "Level One trauma center," commenting that Tony would not have survived in an ordinary facility with fewer specialists on hand. Tony's life is still in danger, Plepler explains, which is why they have reinduced coma. But even unconscious, he may hear things, so Plepler recommends that the family keep talking to him and play him his favorite music to "keep him engaged." This music therapy is a real-life treatment. It also makes for a perfect soundtrack as Carmela reminisces to Tony about how they fell in love years ago and how bad she feels about telling him his sinful ways will lead him straight to hell when he dies.

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This setting—a private hospital room with Tony in a coma—serves as an excellent dramatic device because it gives each family member, and some of the mob, an opportunity for personal monologues. Carmela, Meadow, A.J., Paulie, and others offer sentiments they probably would not have revealed if Tony were able to interrupt or even wince. This is rather like confession in a Catholic church. A hospital, after all, is, in some respects, a sacred place; it is where people are born and where they die and even has a chapel for religious expression.

Tony, in fact, has a near-death experience during a bout of what his heart monitor displays as ventricular tachycardia (an excessively fast heartbeat). While the medical staff furiously works to save his life, Tony is in the process of seeing the famous light of death and nearly gets drawn into a heavenly mansion filled with relatives who have passed away. From the nearby woods, he hears a little girl calling “Daddy, don’t go, daddy”—a voice we gradually recognize as Meadow’s. As the nurses verify his much improved vital signs, Tony is suddenly back among the living—to the joy of his family. After a while, he manages to hoarsely say to Carmela, “I’m dead, right?” “No,” replies Carmela, “in Newark . . .”—a line guaranteed to draw a laugh from New Yorkers in the television audience.

Probably the most blistering moment of medical satire in the entire story arc occurs in “The Fleishy Part of the Thigh” when a mostly recuperated Tony receives a visit in his hospital room from an attractive woman whom he assumes is a medical doctor because of the white hospital coat she is wearing. (Patients often make erroneous assumptions about who is a doctor or nurse or other employee.) Once Tony has finished flirting with her, she reveals that she is a “Utilization Review Specialist,” working with the insurance companies to make sure patients do not stay in the hospital too long and run up too much expense for all concerned. Tony is shocked, enraged that, after all the insurance premiums he has paid over the years, she is trying to kick him out in the street, as he puts it. She expresses her opinion that he should just be glad to have insurance because without it he would have

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been refused admission and sent along to a "county hospital" where he probably "would have died." And how did her hospital know that Tony, who was unconscious when brought in, had insurance? She explains that an ambulance paramedic did a "Wallet Biopsy" to find Tony's insurance card and thus ascertain that he would not cost the hospital a financial loss. (How lucky that Tony had not lost his wallet like Kevin Finnerty!) Angered by this Wallet Biopsy tale, Tony speaks for a few million Americans when he vociferously orders her out of his room, calling her a less than polite name in the process. Of course, none of this is actually her fault; rather, it is the system that has failed, leaving hospitals and patients alike in dire financial straights due to the lack of universal health insurance coverage in this country.

Tony, healthy enough to be released, whether he thinks so or not, has survived his near-death experience relatively unscathed thanks to excellent doctors and nurses. The young paramedic who performed the Wallet Biopsy has a near-death experience of his own, courtesy of Christopher and Tony, who think he has stolen cash when he rifled through Tony's wallet. Fortunately, Tony is in a benevolent mood by the time he leaves the hospital and lets the young man remain unharmed. In the mandatory wheelchair, Tony squints at the sun shining down upon him as he exits, and gives his best Lou Gehrig speech about being the luckiest man in the world. "From now on," intones Tony, "every day is a gift." Thanks to the best healthcare that money can buy, Tony can now go back to killing people in peace.

The Sopranos did a remarkably realistic job of portraying medical care, health insurance issues, and the reactions of patients and families confronted with illness and pain. Although fans of the series probably would not have complained much had the details not been perfect, it is commendable that the series' producers, directors, and advisers cared enough to get it right while never sacrificing dramatic effect in the cause of such authenticity.

Epilogue: On June 14, 2007, the cast of *The Sopranos* hosted a charity cruise and auction at Pier Sixty in New York City to benefit St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. According to Tony Sirico (Paulie),

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the event raised \$610,000 for the hospital. Adding to it the total from a previous event, *The Sopranos* cast, who spent endless hours in make-believe hospitals over the years, have now raised over a million dollars for the real-life hospital.³ Nothing could be more appropriate.

¹ Figures based on characters listed in "The Sopranos Episode Guide," 13 August 2007 <http://www.tv.com/thesopranos/show/314/episode_guide.html>.

² Carol J. Huston, *Professional Issues in Nursing: Challenges and Opportunities* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006), 453.

³ "Sopranos Cast Raise More Than \$1 million for St. Jude's Hospital," press release, 21 August 2007
<http://community.livejournal.com>.