

THE NBC DOCUMENTARY
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We have criticized TV documentaries on medicine so often in the past that it's only fair to hand out a compliment or two to NBC for the documentary on health shown early last January. Most of the doctors here who saw it felt that the program was well done and that it presented many of medicine's current problems in a fair, well-balanced manner. Even the AMA, which has often screamed foul about network presentations, officially praised this latest three-hour NBC effort.

The theme brought out most prominently was that there are no simple solutions to the many, many complex problems of medical care, its delivery and its increasing costs. The animated cartoon episode dealing with the dilemmas of patient, hospital and doctor decisions was especially effective. Well presented, also, was the great need for cooperation between hospitals in a community, to avoid wasteful duplication of expensive facilities. The Denver situation of eleven hospitals with CAT scanners within a small metropolitan area was a distressing example of this common problem.

To present the portion devoted to the surgical treatment of breast cancer, the choice of a relatively young female commentator who had recently had a simple mastectomy was not a particularly good one in our opinion. Her personal bias was too evident, and the impression left that the radical procedure was not only unnecessary but also disabling and disfiguring was a distortion of fact and an oversimplification of what is essentially a difficult and sometimes controversial surgical decision.

Even though the role of government, government safety requirements and the minimum-wage problem were not particularly stressed, the whole aspect of the rising cost of health service was dealt with evenhandedly. Especially instructive was the attitude of the patient toward a hospital bill. As long as the third-party payer is picking up the tab, why worry about itemized details of the cost? Unfortunately, most doctors have this same disregard.

We felt that the first half to three quarters of the program was better than the concluding portions that dealt more with a few unfortunate personal cases and ended up in the realm of a technical research and science-fiction fantasy of manipulating genes and producing the immortal, disease-free human. But three hours of television watching is a long time to devote to any subject, and even TV producers and directors must be allowed a little leeway to indulge in human interest dramatics and the always popular speculation, "Who knows what miracles the future holds?". Anyway, NBC deserves credit for finally breaking away from the sensationalist Jack Anderson-Dan Rather type of reportage and presenting a responsible and balanced view of our complex American health care system.