M*A*S*H and its Metaphors

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Airing in the United States between 1972 until 1983, *M*A*S*H* was a television sitcom that focussed on the surgeons at a mobile army hospital during the Korean War in the 1950s. Despite wide critical acclaim and popular interest, there are only two published academic studies that have focussed specifically on *M*A*S*H*; those of David Diffrient and James Wittebols.[1] Whilst Wittebols argues that *M*A*S*H* followed and reflected social change, rather than leading the charge in changing values, Diffrient, on the other hand, seeks to "take the reader from contextual issues . . . to textual issues" thus looking at the issues surrounding the creation of the television show and some of the innovative techniques used.[2] As such, whilst the hospital setting was central to the programme, little work has been done to explore how the show addressed medical themes.[3] When scholars have addressed medical issues these have focused on the portrayal of the doctors and the discussion is usually limited to the nature of the rebellion (sex and drinking), and has not gone deeper.[4] This article will thus explore some of the innumerable examples of concepts originating in medical anthropology that appear in *M*A*S*H*. After giving a brief overview of the programme, this article will use sections on metaphor and power & authority to analyse the show's underlying themes of power dynamics between military and medical authority, ethnomedicine, and the Sisyphean task of medicine.

I. The Television Series

*M*A*S*H* was a television sitcom that followed the lives of the personnel at a *M*A*S*H* (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) during the Korean War (1950-1954). Airing in the US from 1972 until 1983, the programme revolved around the lives of three surgeons and assorted other personnel who took neither the war the military or themselves very seriously. The final

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[1] David Diffrient, *TV Milestones: M*A*S*H* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008). James Wittebols, *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1998).
[2] Diffrient, *TV Milestones,* 8.
[3] Indeed, there are few studies that focus on medical anthropology and the visual arts in any way though there are discussions of anthropology and ethnographic film as part of the field of Visual Anthropology. There are recent studies that look at the role of cinema in producing the patient through the clinical gaze that Foucault describes (Kirsten Ostherr*, Medical Visions: Producing the Patient through Film, Televisions, and Imaging Technologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012), and medically associated media represent a culture's values: Reagan, Tomes,and Treichler *Medicine's Moving Pictures, Medicine, Health and Bodies in American Film and Television* (Rochester: Univeristy of Rochester Press 2007).
[4] Peter Dans, *Doctors in the Movies: Boil the Water and Just Say Aah* (Bloomington IL: Medi-Ed Press, 2000).

episode set records which still stand for a viewing audience of a finale of a series. The programme began its life as a novel (*MASH*) by Korean veteran Richard Hooker.[5] A film of the same name (*M*A*S*H*) was directed by Robert Altman in 1970,[6] from which the TV series took the idea of "re-enacting the "culture war" that was going on in America when the show started in which liberalism, the counter-culture and the anti-war movement, were in a battle with traditional culture, government, and the military."[7]

II. Metaphor

Many anthropologists stress the importance of metaphor, because metaphors can inform us about the social construction of health, disease, and medicine itself, as well as demonstrating the ideas and values important to the culture under study. Emily Martin's work on the metaphors found in medical textbooks would be just one example.[8] Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson make the case that each culture lives by its metaphors, that each culture uses metaphors to make sense of experience.[9] The overarching medical metaphor that begins in the novel, is made famous by the film, and is repeated endlessly during the many years of the television show *M*A*S*H* is that of the insanity of war.[10] In a retrospective on the film production, Robert Altman, the director, said "What the picture's about and, uh, it keeps getting more clear to me all the time, is the insanity".[11] Tom Skerritt, one of the actors in the movie, said the feature is about "the madness of war and how to survive it".[12] In the film, a nurse, after being exposed to the camp while taking a shower, screams "This isn't a hospital! It's an insane asylum!"[13] In one of the TV episodes, Hawkeye, one of the defiant surgeons,

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5 Richard Hooker, *MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors* (NY: Perennial, 1968).

6 *M*A*S*H*, written by Ring Lardner, Jr., and directed by Robert Altman (Twentieth Century Fox, 1970).

7 Ken Sanes, *Taking Sides: Taking Sides: MASH and the Struggle of Life Against Death* <http://www.transparencynow.com/mash.htm> n.d. [Accessed 15 April 2015].

8 Emily Martin, 'The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles', *Signs,* 16 (1991), 485-501.

9 Geoff Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

10 For more discussion of medical metaphor, see David M. Hammond and Beverly J. Smith 'Death, Medicine, and Religious Solidarity in Martin Scorsese's Bringing Out the Dead', *Logos*, 12 (2004), 109-123.Of course, this metaphor is not original with M*A*S*H, even in film. In fact, the same year that M*A*S*H was released as a film, 1970 , another movie about the insanity of war was also released, Catch-22, based on the Joseph Heller novel of 1961, a work far more complex than Richard Hooker's M*A*S*H. However, the films had the reverse of the success of the novels: Catch-22 was poorly received while M*A*S*H earned considerable critical and box office acclaim. And another acclaimed film, The Bridge over the River Kwai (Lean 1957), ends with a physician repeating to himself "Madness!" after a British squad blows up a bridge that British POWs have been constructing for the Japanese, despite the 'aid and comfort' they are providing for the Japanese.

11 Anonymous Backstory: M*A*S*H..< http://sarcasmalley.com/mashbstory.htm> n.d. [accessed 21 April 2015].

12 Ibid.

13 Anonymous M*A*S*H Reviews. http://sarcasmalley.com/mashrev.htm n.d.[accessed 21 April 15].

says “Insanity is just a state of mind.” Thus, the insanity of the specific situation of any given episode symbolizes the insanity of the Korean War, and indeed any war. The irreverence of the series as a whole can be understood as a comment on the insanity of war.

In virtually every episode of the TV programme, there is some mention of madness, craziness, or insanity. Most of these mentions are related to Klinger, an enlisted man who spends a lot of his early years on the program as a corpsman who is frequently assigned kitchen duty. Klinger looking for a ‘Section 8’ is one of the more famous running gags of the television show. Klinger’s goal is to get out of the army alive, and he believes a ‘Section 8’ is the way to go, so he clothes himself in dresses as a way of demonstrating his ‘insanity.’ Of course, anyone sane enough to deliberately seek a Section 8 would, by definition, not be insane (as in ‘Catch-22’[14]). It should be noted that Klinger does not limit himself to the Section 8 as a way out: he’s willing to suffer from a variety of other diseases that he hears about, like fainting spells and scoliosis. In fact, Klinger doesn’t limit himself to disease at all: he tries boating, hang gliding, disguising himself as a Swede, wearing a wet suit during the summer, getting down to his skivvies during the winter, and repeatedly requesting a hardship leave on the basis that some member of the family is dying or pregnant. The one thing Klinger will not do is sign papers saying he’s a transvestite (2.27).[15] At one point, he’s quite concerned that he’s really going crazy (6.4), but in that episode, “War of Nerves,” almost everybody is questioning his or her own sanity.

The other issue, as Skerritt says, is how to survive the insanity. One way of coping with the insanity is a picnic with a game of tug of war. Hawkeye, one of the rebellious surgeons, tries to convince his commanding officer: “Look, we need this [picnic]. If we don’t go crazy once in a while, we’ll all go crazy.” (3.16). The most popular way, by far, of coping with the madness was with alcohol. Not far behind, of course, would be the pranks and practical jokes, such as putting on gorilla suits, putting a toe tag on Frank Burns as he sleeps, or spreading a rumour that Marilyn Monroe will be coming to the 4077th.

In the “War of Nerves” [16] episode, the problem of coping is solved by a ‘ritual of rebellion’ as described by Max Gluckman.[17] A couple soldiers are assigned to burn infested Chinese uniforms, and by the next day have accumulated enough debris for the makings of a huge bonfire with various soldiers adding ladders and the Army cookbook. The

[14] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22: A Novel.* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1971).
[15] I am citing the episodes by season number, followed by episode number.
[16] While this and many other titles are significant, the viewing audience rarely knew what these titles were of this or any other television show.
[17] Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954).

commanding officer, Colonel Sherman Potter, is incensed, but a frequently visiting psychiatrist, Sidney Freedman, points out that "They don't want to burn the whole camp, just carefully selected bits of it…it's actually a pretty controlled response to this place. They might have just found themselves that pressure valve you were looking for." (6.4) Gluckman claimed decades ago that such 'rituals of rebellion' are not aimed at overthrowing the existing system, but merely selectively adjusting it, thus maintaining the stability of a society. Another example of such a 'ritual of rebellion' takes place the day after Christmas when, as suggested by some visiting British officers, the enlisted men and the officers will trade places for a day (10.9). This role reversal is taken from the English tradition of Boxing Day (December 26th), when the poor could demand a 'figgy pudding' of the rich (as they do in the carol 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas'), and not face retribution. That particular Christmas carol dates to the sixteenth century, when carollers on that one day could demand gifts from the rich, could and did challenge authority, behaviour that would not be tolerated on any other day of the year.

III. Power/Authority

These rebellions lead us to the issue of authority. Medical anthropology has long recognized the authority of the healer in most societies, except our own.[18] That began to change in the 1960s, as many, both within anthropology and outside it, began to question mainstream biomedicine and many other social institutions.[19] Anthropologists began to understand that they had not scrutinized biomedicine as they had other ethnomedicines, and that they must begin to treat biomedicine as any other ethnomedicine. Outside the discipline, women led the critique of the power of the male-dominated profession. How biomedicine accrues and exerts its power has been studied, most notably, by Michel Foucault.[20] At the same time, feminists and civil rights advocates were challenging power for broader rights and recognition. The television program, to some extent, got caught up in this, with the doctors frequently challenging military and medical authority and, over the years, changing attitudes about womanizing and doing several shows about racism.[21] In the television series, the doctors use that power repeatedly, both in defiance of military power as well as in efforts to achieve other goals.

[18] As is evident from the title of an old ethnography: John Cawte, *Medicine is the Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974).
[19] Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 27.
[20] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).
[21] Wittebols claims that the television show reflected changes in society, rather than driving them. See Wittebols, *Watching M*A*S*H.*

In the very first program in the series (1.1), Hawkeye and Trapper (the original two defiant surgeons) use their medical authority in both of these ways. They are attempting to raise money for the tuition of a Korean student to go to school in the US but are thwarted by Frank Burns, the much-maligned hypocritical ‘patriot’. In response Hawkeye and Trapper conspire to sedate Frank to keep him out of the way as they raffle off a nurse, thus using medical means to achieve a non-medical goal. Despite their success at getting Frank out of the way, their plans for the raffle are reported to a General who arrives at the M*A*S*H just in time to find that the raffle has been won by the resident priest. The General demands that Hawkeye and Trapper be arrested, but they point out that arresting them is not possible. Helicopters are on the way with wounded soldiers on board, and arrested surgeons cannot or will not operate. After the operating room (OR) session, the General is too impressed with the surgical skill of the two rebels to proceed with the arrest.

Over the course of the series, the surgeons use medical means to subvert military authority.[22] At one point, however, Hawkeye does an appendectomy on a perfectly healthy commander with a high rate of casualties (7.22). B. J. Hunnicut, Trapper’s replacement, is outraged, arguing that it is never ethical to right a wrong (high casualties) with another wrong (operating needlessly). This is, of course, where the usually benevolent power of medicine can go wrong, as evident, for instance, in the Tuskegee study. In this study doctors from the US Public Health Service failed to treat almost 400 poor African-American men infected with syphilis in order to understand the “natural history of the disease”; these doctors hoped to demonstrate that it was the same in African- and European-Americans, and to suggest that they were equal in their response to the disease.[23]

Throughout the series, the surgeons regularly confront military authority.[24] Hawkeye defies a General’s order to operate on a wounded soldier because Hawkeye feels the man has not sufficiently stabilized (1.4). In the next season, when Frank Burns conforms to

[22] Further examples of using medicine to achieve a non-medical goal: To ‘gaslight’ a commander with a high rate of casualties (1.16), threaten a supply sergeant with condemning his workplace because of the plague or cholera if he doesn’t release a shipment to them of barbecue ribs from Chicago (3.11), win a boxing match to impress a nurse (1.3), evade a military checkpoint by claiming that the vehicle’s passenger has a fake disease, ‘neuropraxia’ which, as the MP approaches, is said to be highly contagious (4.1), trade a medical diagnosis of ear problems so that a supply sergeant can take a boat home with his many procurements instead of having to fly for a promise of a microscope (4.5), shutdown a souvenir seller with the threat of declaring him too sick to fly his helicopter, because his trade entices Korean children to hunt in dangerous areas for military brass (5.22), and trick a marine into believing that he’s contracted a social disease when his urine turns blue as the result of having taken methylene blue as a ‘pep pill’ in order for the M*A*S*H unit to beat the Marines at bowling (9.8).

[23] Susan Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[24] This is not entirely fictional. In a non-fiction book about M*A*S*H, Apel and Apel describe doctors defying military protocol by developing a vein graft to repair arterial injuries. Otto F. Apel, Jr., M.D. and Pat Apel, *MASH: An Army Surgeon in Korea* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 149.

military authority, delaying surgery for a CID man because there is no other CID man present as required by regulations, Hawkeye and Trapper operate to save his life (2.13). In ‘Officer of the Day’ (3.3), when a military intelligence officer named Colonel Flagg wants the doctors to discharge a North Korean prisoner who was wounded, Trapper tells the colonel that “There’s a medical consideration which supersedes the military.” When threatened by Flagg, they point out that the worst that could happen to them is that they would get sent to the front, but since they are already there, they are not worried. The very next episode, Trapper and Hawkeye refuse to fake a death certificate for a General who ‘died with his boots off’ to satisfy the General’s aide (3.4). Later in the series, B. J. and Hawkeye refuse to release a North Korean wounded man to allow him to be used as part of a public relations project (11.3). There are several episodes in which Colonel Potter, as the commanding officer of M*A*S*H, says that it’s difficult to discipline doctors (e.g., 4.21, 4.24). In an episode in which Hawkeye travels to the peace talks, he gets by the check points by saying he is on his way to treat a patient. He succeeds in finding a General who is suffering from gastritis due to the stress, and gets into the peace talks where the surgeon has his say. He is followed back to camp by a General’s aide who says that, off the record, the General wishes he were a doctor so he could say what Hawkeye did (7.2). Thus, it can be seen that medicine outdoes the military yet again.

How does medicine achieve its power? Foucault argues that it is through the ‘clinical gaze.’ This gaze is achieved in the late 1700s, as new ways of thinking about the human experience of disease developed with the French Revolution, spurred on by the new way of thinking of the scientific revolution. Together, these philosophical changes created the 'mind-body dichotomy,' which allows medicine to recreate the body as a machine with interchangeable parts, producing remarkable achievements in controlling disease, but also, Foucault argues, achievements in controlling populations through medical surveillance. The knowledge that is power is created with technological innovations like the stethoscope of the early 1800s and X-rays of the late 1800s. The *M*A*S*H* episode about saving Private Lamb from the slaughter in the mess tent includes the story of a young soldier who has shot himself in the foot. Hawkeye tells him it is a “good thing the guy that hit you wasn't that great a shot. . . . Cold can really mess up a guy's aim, you know. Cold, anxiety, fear.” The soldier is impressed: “You really know a lot about things, don't you? People.” Hawkeye replies that it comes from opening them up and peeking inside. (3.14)

But, again, there are limitations to the power of medicine. In an episode focusing on Winchester's search for insight on the nature of death he tells Rizzo (the camp's mechanic) that a jeep can be taken apart, piece by piece, and reassembled, similar to the picture of the

human body given the mind-body dichotomy and, hence, demonstrates the limitations of medicine itself. (9.20) In another episode with Winchester, Winchester tells the resident priest that he understands that he can “work wonders on flesh and bone [but] I perform no miracle surgery on the soul.” But for Foucault, the philosophical and epistemological changes that gave medicine its authority combined with the interests of power, so that as the human body became a site of knowledge, it also became a site for manipulation (Anonymous 2008). And as demonstrated above, Hawkeye is guilty of exactly that when he operates on a healthy human being.

One other result of the power and authority of medicine is the opportunity for physical intimacy that doesn't occur in other realms of society. The physician can probe us physically as well as mentally in ways that society rarely sanctions otherwise. This is evident in *M*A*S*H* when Hawkeye needs to give Margaret Houlihan an injection. Throughout the series, he makes remarks about her beauty, although most of the time very little comes of it (Reiss claims that the conflict between the two “had been one of the larger threads running through the dramatic skein of the series”).[25] When giving her the injection he says he won't say a word while preparing to inject her in the gluteus maximus, but then says if he were going to say something it would be that hers is magnificent. (5.19) Margaret would never have allowed such an opportunity under normal circumstances, but goes along, albeit reluctantly, when medical authority is involved.

There are gaps in the power. In the first of the more complex episodes of the series (less farcical episodes with significant and serious subplots), Hawkeye meets up with a journalist friend who is writing about the war by living it as a soldier, rather than reporting on it (1.17). The friend is then fatally wounded. As the commander, Colonel Henry Blake, tries to console Hawkeye he tells him that he was taught two rules about war in command school: “Rule number one is young men die. Rule number two is that doctors can’t change rule number one.” Clearly, this set of rules is not applicable only to war. All patients will die, and doctors can’t change that. Doctors, of course, have succeeded in delaying death for many, but they do not forever prevent it. Another apparently deliberate allusion to the Sisyphean task is an episode in which Hawkeye is mistakenly declared dead (4.4). In frustration, he takes the Army up on the mistake and gets on the bus, where only the driver is sitting up, since all the passengers on this bus are dead. Explaining to B. J., Hawkeye says:

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[25] David Reiss, *M*A*S*H: The Exclusive Inside Story of TV’s Most Popular Show* (Indianapolis: Holder General Publishing Division, 1981).

> I'm tired of death. Tired to death. If you can't lick it, join it. I've been fighting death since I came over here. . . . They'll (the wounded) keep coming whether I'm here or not. Trapper went home and they're still coming. Henry got killed and they're still coming. Wherever they come from, they'll never run out.[26]

Hawkeye occasionally alludes to himself and other doctors as being God. This image of healers as God, or at least as God's assistant, is a common means of portrayal. Dr Stanley Livingstone describes a 'debate' between a missionary doctor and a 'rain doctor' in Africa in 1857, during which the Rain Doctor says to Livingstone, "God has given us one little thing, which you know nothing of. He has given us the knowledge of certain medicines by which we can make rain."[27] William May, a noted bioethicist, suggests other images of the physician and ingeniously connects them to various literary images. He finds the doctor as patriarch (or God) in the Old Testament, the doctor as engineer in Kipling, the doctor as warrior in Hemingway, and the doctor as partner with the patient in Faulkner. While *M*A*S*H* portrays all of these images of doctors,[28] the most prevalent is the doctor as warrior, with the military metaphor mixing with the medical one (May). In one episode (5.20), Colonel Potter is explaining to a General's aide why Pierce, as he tries to resuscitate a wounded soldier in OR, says "Don't let the bastard win." Potter explains that Hawkeye is battling death, and as good as he is as a surgeon, is not the right doctor to be the General's personal physician:

> *Potter:* Because Pierce is a maverick from the top of his unshorn head to the tips of his uncut toenails. . . . He isn't even housebroken. . . . When it comes to death, Pierce is a sore loser. . . .
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> *General's aide*: It's part of life, part of war - we're soldiers.

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[26] David Livingstone Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa. Produced by Alan. R Light and David Widger. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1039/1039-h/1039-h.htm.>2006[1857] accessed 21 April 2015.

[27] One image that I believe is misplaced about the M*A*S*H doctors is that of hero. See Joan Cassell, *Expected Miracles* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 1991). She portrayed the surgeons as analogous to astronauts with the 'right stuff,' driving speedy sports cars as they 'pushed the envelope'. Hawkeye, after watching Winchester, the surgeon with the 'Major Ego' (as in the title of the episode), resuscitate a patient, says that Charles has done something heroic (7.8). But the surgeon is not a person of courage or one who does brave deeds. What courage does it take to put someone else's life at risk, while suffering no threat to your own safety? Granted, M*A*S*H surgeons were under the threat of military attack, and that makes them heroes, but resuscitating a patient takes no courage at all. It is the patients who should be credited with being heroes, because they are the ones taking the risks and summoning their courage and coming face-to-face with their mortality.

[28] This is pointed out in Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, in a discussion of how important culture is to any given metaphor.

Potter: Maybe we are but Pierce isn't. He's just humoring us by wearing that uniform. He's one doctor who'll never be nonchalant where death is concerned. He'll always take it personally.

General's aide: He could crack up with that attitude.

These representations are constructed with metaphors. The medical metaphor is widely used in war movies, but evidently goes well beyond that in popular culture. It is certainly no accident that so many television programs revolve around doctors and hospitals, given that health and life itself are of paramount interest, and thus medical metaphors are widely understood.[29] Two useful examples of the use of the medical metaphor in film are One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)[30] and the George C. Scott movie, The Hospital (1971).[31] In the former, Ken Kesey uses the mental asylum to represent the conformity of 1950s society, so that patients voluntarily commit themselves, to the amazement of newly arrived McMurphy.[32] In the latter, Paddy Chayevsky uses the chaos surrounding an urban hospital to represent societal upheaval in the 1960s. In particular, the life of George C. Scott's character, the chief of medicine, has recently begun to spiral out of control; this reflects the course of a patient who was admitted for a routine check-up and, as the result of a variety of incidents of iatrogenesis, has had a kidney removed and is now comatose.[33]

In the television series, the medical metaphor is being used to explain medicine itself. In an episode discussed previously, Hawkeye removes the healthy appendix of a Commander who has a high casualty rate (7.22). He returns to the tent he shares with B.J., who tells Hawkeye that there will be lots of casualties coming in shortly as the choppers can be heard arriving. He says that Hawkeye only treated a symptom and the disease goes merrily on. In another episode discussed previously, in which Hawkeye and B.J. threaten a souvenir seller with grounding (5.22), Potter delivers a lecture to the camp about the problem of souvenir buying and selling. The souvenirs the chopper pilot sells are made out of military scrap that Korean children find for him, all too often in minefields. Potter tells them:

We're in the midst of an epidemic. It's not the plague, not the chickenpox, not the creeping crud. It's the buying, selling and collecting of war souvenirs and it's

[29] *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, written by Lawrence Haubman and Bo Goldman and directed by Miloš Foreman (United Artists, 1975)

[30] *The Hospital*, written by Paddy Chayevsky and directed by Arthur Hiller (United Artists, 1971).

[31] Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (NY: Signet, 1963).

[32] *The Hospital* (1971).

[33] Daniel Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine, and the' Placebo Effect'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

> getting people killed. The enemy leave their booby trapped pistols, bayonets and helmets all over the place 'cause they know some slaphappy GI will try to pick up that cacaraca and before he knows it his nickname is Lefty. On top of that Korean kids scavenge in the minefields for brass to make ashtrays for us to stick our butts in. So stop making a market for a bunch of trash you don't need anyway.

Here the argument could be made that, rather than treat a symptom, Potter is recommending that the consumers question the source of the demand. Hawkeye, while treating symptoms, is applying charity to the downstream end of the problem while, in this case, Potter goes for the upstream approach of justice.

The writers of M*A*S*H dealt with the issue of placebo on several occasions, at one point creating supply shortages that prompted the use of placebos to achieve pain control for the wounded (6.24). In another episode, Hawkeye cures the ‘common hot’ by giving Klinger placebos during a heat wave (11.8). Obviously, the success of placebos calls into question the validity of the ‘mind-body dichotomy’ philosophy that much of biomedicine is based on, hence the anthropological focus on the paradox of the placebo: the placebo is defined as an inert/ineffective treatment, and yet there is a ‘placebo effect,’ to the point where in some clinical trials the placebo has more success than the ‘active’ treatment in question.[34] So the ineffective treatment IS effective. The use of ‘placebo’ also provokes questions of the power/authority of biomedicine.

*M*A*S*H* has been critiqued for its portrayal of Korea and its culture.[35] It improved on this in later years. In a 1972 episode, the doctors decide to try a Korean remedy for a rash afflicting many of the wounded (7.11). The next year, in season eight, in another episode about Korean medicine, Winchester condescendingly calls three visiting Korean healers by the given names of the Three Stooges. He then aggravates his bad back and is offered all sorts of remedies by various staff, like moist heat, a poultice of olive oil and pomegranate seeds, and physical manipulation, but Winchester insists that as a doctor he knows best, and that he needs rest and solitude. However, Potter intercedes because of the imminent arrival of more wounded, and orders Winchester to succumb to acupuncture performed by one of the Korean healers. Winchester is immediately cured. For the anthropologist, there is not only a discussion of Korean ethnomedicine - there is also an additional lesson in the

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[34] See both Wittebols and Diffrient.

[35] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition.* (NY: Basic Books, 1988).

various treatments available within the biomedical culture, introducing another anthropological concept called medical pluralism, defined as an individual or culture making use of more than one medical system.

Lastly, I must mention the importance of narrative. Arthur Kleinman famously, at least within medical anthropology, did much of his early work on narrative. As a psychiatrist, he realized the importance of a patient telling the physician the narrative of the illness.[36] Physicians have long asked about what is called the 'history of the present illness,' indicating the importance of the story of the experience of illness. The anthropologist is looking for insight into the experience of illness, from the perspective of both the patient and the healer. Wittebols suggests that after the fourth or fifth season, *M*A*S*H* shifts away from making political statements to exploring the problems of individual characters and how they cope (1998).[37] But as mentioned earlier, Hawkeye pleads for a picnic to protect the sanity of the unit (3.16), and in the fourth season Hawkeye again suggests how close he is to insanity as he is required to "go against my training to say take two aspirin and go get yourself killed." In two episodes, Hawkeye comes close to the edge of insanity, in one having nightmares (5.13), and in another having a serious allergic reaction (9.17). And, of course, he eventually does completely succumb to an acute mental breakdown in the finale (11.16). Portrayal of the healer experience is not limited to Hawkeye: in the "Dreams" episode, all the main characters have dreams/nightmares while napping during an onslaught of wounded (8.22). B.J. dreams about how he is pulled away from dancing with his wife so that he can operate. Winchester tries magic tricks to save the wounded but the tricks fail. Margaret dreams of how her personal relationships are bloodied by the war.

The experience of the patient is evident throughout the series, with two notable examples. One is a story about the doctor becoming the patient as Hawkeye gets blinded by an exploding stove, and wonders if he will get to keep his nickname. He tells B.J. that it is an amazing learning experience (5.3). In one of the more innovative episodes, the entire program is done from the patient's point of view, as the camera shows us what a patient who undergoes a trachetotomy sees/hears (7.10). The patient is even portrayed as solving a personal problem for Colonel Potter that eludes those who know him best.

[36] Cheryl Mattingly and Linda Gaaro, *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[37] Medical authority rests on the nearly universal concern for health and life. However, it has no power over those who can set aside that concern, such as martyrs, heroic figures and suicides.

IV. Conclusion

*M*A*S*H* began as a trivial sitcom; however, even in the first episode there is comment on the power of medicine and, indeed, the authority of medicine, even when not effective by today's standards. Thus, even absolute political rule may be unable to defy medical authority.

While I do not claim that the writers had medical anthropology in mind when writing the script, there is at least one piece of evidence that they were thinking along those lines: Gene Reynolds, an early producer of the series, who seems to recognize the Sisyphean task that is healing:

> These doctors are in this little cockpit putting people back together again in the middle of a war in this very strange far-off place. It's existentialist in that they had no control about getting there. They didn't volunteer, they were drafted. They can't leave because they are in the army, so that take the control of their lives away from them, which is an existential position.
>
> What they're doing is absurd, it's futile. They're in the middle of a war where everything is designed to destroy, to tear bodies up, to maim to kill. They're in the business of putting these bodies back together again, only to have them sent back—sort of like recycling people—which becomes like shoving a rock up a hill only to have it roll down again at the end of the night." [38]

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[38] This claim is made throughout the series, and in this episode is more fully explored, perhaps reflecting the concerns of Gene Reynolds, an early producer of the series, who seems to recognize the Sisyphean task that is healing: "These doctors are in this little cockpit putting people back together again in the middle of a war in this very strange far-off place. It's existentialist in that they had no control about getting there. They didn't volunteer, they were drafted. They can't leave because they are in the army, so that take the control of their lives away from them, which is an existential position. What they're doing is absurd, it's futile. They're in the middle of a war where everything is designed to destroy, to tear bodies up, to maim to kill. They're in the business of putting these bodies back together again, only to have them sent back—sort of like recycling people—which becomes like shoving a rock up a hill only to have it roll down again at the end of the night." Reiss, *M*A*S*H: The Exclusive Inside Story*, pp.120-121.