A physician with autism in a TV series

We read with interest the In Context article1 by Jules Morgan on the increasing presence of autism in mainstream television (TV), discussing some examples from documentary series and TV dramas. We would like to add another relevant example from an American TV series: The Good Doctor, which considers the life of a young physician with autism and savant syndrome, Shaun Murphy (played by British actor Freddie Highmore), who is starting his training as a resident in surgery. The series enables viewers to appreciate how a physician with autism can be a good professional, even sometimes outshining his colleagues.

Based on an award-winning South Korean 2013 series of the same name written by Park Jae-bum, the American TV series debuted on September, 2017, and included 18 episodes. A second season will premiere in the autumn of 2018 in the USA.

The Good Doctor shows how Murphy tries to adapt to the complex world of a general hospital. Problems arise when he starts his integration in the surgical team and begins to take care of patients. The autistic doctor struggles to grasp the intricacies of the doctor–patient relationship and the workings of the hospital. However, his near-photographic recall and ability to note minute details help him succeed in his daily activities, and his colleagues appreciate these contributions. The series also shows how some hospital managers find it difficult to accept that an autistic physician can be a good professional, although Murphy is fortunate to have a protective mentor in Dr Glassman, a childhood friend who is now the hospital director.

For more on The Good Doctor season 2 premiere see https://abc.go.com/shows/the-good-doctor/news/updates/the-good-doctor-season-2-premiere-date-announced

As Morgan’s In Context1 pointed out about Rain Man, this series might also reinforce the misconception that autism and savant syndrome always go together.2 Although these film and TV portrayals can lend weight to stereotypes and stigma, we agree with Simon Baron-Cohen3 that they can also help raise awareness about the autistic spectrum and the employability of individuals with diseases along this spectrum, as well as about the vicissitudes of their romantic relationships. This awareness should help, as Morgan writes, “to normalise autism, and to avoid enforcing a standard of ‘normal’ in a society that has many shades of difference.”1

We declare no competing interests.

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1 Morgan J. Has autism found a place in mainstream TV? Lancet Neurol 2018; published online June 11. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(18)30236-9.