Following the presentations for the 2011 Sentinel for Health Awards, the winning writers participated in a panel discussion that offered behind-the-scenes looks about their respective shows and the genesis of some of their TV stories.

Taking part in the conversation were Bridget Carpenter, co-executive producer of *Parenthood* (NBC); Zoanne Clack, co-executive producer of *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC); Jennifer Cecil, co-executive producer of *Private Practice* (ABC); and Gabriel Llanas, a writer for *Off the Map* and now *Private Practice* (ABC).

They were joined by Martin Kaplan, director of the USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center, and Sandra de Castro Buffington, director of the Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the Lear Center. HH&S, which hosted the Sentinel Awards, provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for health storylines, including briefings with experts on a wide range of public health topics.

Kaplan, who served as moderator, got things rolling by asking about the need for strong drama being constantly weighed against the medical facts. Can they recall a time when one or the other came out on top?

Llanas talked about one storyline that was part of the *Off the Map* episode that won in this year’s global health category, involving trapped miners underground. Originally, Llanas wanted to do a story about illegal gold mining, which he said is a huge problem in South America and a serious health issue because it involved the use of mercury, a potentially toxic metal that is often dumped into drinking and bathing water or is handled directly by the miners.

That story, Llanas said, then evolved into being about workers trapped in a collapsed mine—still a good topic because of the safety hazards that miners face and a subject very much in the news then with the constant media coverage surrounding the Chilean miners. But the story was deemed too “dark” by the powers-that-be, Llanas said, and “nobody wanted to spend an entire hour of primetime television underground in a coal mine.”

On a whim, Llanas said, he re-pitched the story to make it about an abandoned Inca gold mine that was cursed. Throw in some trapped miners and that’s how the episode eventually aired on TV. The story changed just a bit, Llanas acknowledged somewhat ruefully.

Clack, who’s a doctor, remembered her opposition to part of a *Grey’s Anatomy* storyline involving a ferry crash and the near-drowning of one of the main characters, the surgeon Meredith Grey. Clack still shook her head over the fact that, even after undergoing about 24 hours of resuscitation on the show, Meredith was not only extubated (medical-speak for removal of a breathing tube) but she even managed to say the word extubated, and was up on her feet doing hospital rounds shortly after.

“I thought that was wrong,” Clack said in a bit of understatement. “And I lost.”

The writers talked about being as accurate as possible, especially when it came to symptoms and treatment, with the simple rule that you just “don’t fudge important stuff.”

“To get things right is very important,” Cecil said, citing the *Private Practice* episode that she wrote about brain tumors that was a finalist in the minor storyline category. The patient, a teenager who’s an accomplished pianist, undergoes an awake craniotomy in which a patient is conscious and alert during brain surgery. “The procedure itself is very difficult so we wanted to make sure the physicality was presented correctly,” Cecil said.

But when dealing with a topic that’s been done on TV before, the writers seemed to agree that the motivation is to “do the unexpected” and put a little topspin on the topic. More important,
Clack said, was the desire to get away from cliches and make stories “more [human] and more real.”

*Grey’s Anatomy* is “an eighth-season show,” she said. “We’re constantly trying to top ourselves.”

And Clack, for one, said her show relied so often on the expertise provided through Hollywood, Health & Society that they’re “on our speed dial.”

Carpenter, who wrote the episode for *Parenthood* about Asperger’s that won first-place in the major storyline category, pointed out that although her series is not a medical show, the writers strive for accuracy when it comes to health issues. But despite the running storyline on Asperger’s—a form of autism—she said the show is, at heart, a family drama.

All of the writers expressed a sense of wonder and gratification when viewers respond to a storyline that aired—some information conveyed by a TV show that changed or possibly saved someone’s life. Even more amazing, Cecil said, was the number of fans of American TV shows that she encountered during a recent writers trip to India. Despite the poverty all around them, she said, members of the local community still managed to closely follow television shows and were very familiar with the health issues conveyed in the storylines.

Cecil referred to getting these important health messages out to viewers as “slipping the spinach into the brownies.”

But in the end, with the conversation and the evening winding down, Clack said she was reminded of what her boss on a medical show called *Presidio Med* once told her years ago: “The drama always wins.”

“And I took that to heart,” she said.