

The writerly MD and muse of *House*

Dr. Lisa Sanders, MD, was 39 and in her third year of medical school—a midlife career change that followed an Emmy Award-winning career in television medical journalism—when an epiphany struck her.

“When I came to medical school, I had covered medicine for six or seven years, and I felt like I knew all the stories,” she says. “New diseases, new diagnostic tools and new drugs. Basically all stories, I thought, were some variation on those three possibilities.”

In medical school, year three is when students are allowed to interact with real live patients.

“I found this other story that I didn’t even know existed: the diagnosis story.”

Thus began a fascinating career straddling journalism and medicine that produced the long-running Diagnosis column in *The New York Times*, which inspired the TV show *House*, for which Dr. Sanders is a technical advisor.

She started out as a TV news producer, first at ABC and then at CBS. It was a different era, she says. In 1989, when she decided to go to med school, CBS agreed to send her, thinking it would improve her medical reporting. When she got her Emmy, she was thrilled because she figured it would bolster her application to Yale School of Medicine.

“My worry was that they would think I was some kind of loser, floundering and looking for a sinecure,” she says.

A glance at her résumé would tell you that’s a pretty laughable notion. Dr. Sanders not only writes her Diagnosis column, which first ran in 2002. She’s written books, including her 2009 work *Every Patient Tells a Story*.

She teaches at Yale. And she practices medicine at a Yale resident’s clinic in Waterbury, Connecticut, a hardscrabble Rust Belt town northwest of New Haven, where she lives

“I found this other story that I didn’t even know existed: the diagnosis story. It wasn’t being told”

Lisa Sanders, MD

2004–present
Technical advisor, *House MD*

2002–present
Author, *Diagnosis*, *New York Times Magazine*

2000–present
Attending physician,
Waterbury Hospital

and teaches. “It’s a hard place to live, but it’s a great place to be a doctor,” says Dr. Sanders. Because Waterbury has a large and diverse immigrant population, her practice is global in scope. She’s seen cases of typhoid fever, dengue fever and many other exotic maladies. It is, in short, a great place for a diagnostic detective.

“You never know what’s going to walk through that door,” she laughs.

She left TV news behind her while in medical school, which she found to be “almost like a vacation” after the manic 60-plus-hour weeks that television demanded.

She found time to have her two daughters, now ages 13 and 16, during her studies. And she realized that medicine was not at all like math, with its rigid rules and certainties, but rather like a Sherlock Holmes mystery, a puzzle featuring a handful of symptoms and uncountable possible causes.

“I realized this story wasn’t being told,” she says. When her friend Paul Tough became an editor at *The New York Times Magazine*, he asked her if she’d like to try her hand at writing a column. *Diagnosis*, in which Dr. Sanders typically presents the patient, and then expertly leads the reader through the diagnostic process, usually with a few twists and turns, is addictive reading.

It caught the attention of screenwriter Paul Attanasio. “He saw it as a medical procedural,” says Sanders. He also shared her love of Sherlock Holmes and, together with producer David Shore, set out to create a show around the concept of a misanthropic modern-day great detective who wears surgical scrubs instead of a deerstalker.

Hugh Laurie’s pill-popping, pathologically rules-averse Dr. House appeals to American viewers, she says, in part because of our cynicism about doctors and medicine.

“We all want to be taken care of by somebody who puts our interests before their own,” she says, noting a recent study, published in *BMJ Quality and Safety*, which found that just eight out of 10 doctors said they’d always put their patients’ interests before their own.

“But with Dr. House, you know he’s always going to put finding out what’s wrong with you ahead of everything else,” she says. —*Matthew Arnold*



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