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When Katie Couric joined CBS Evening News as its anchor and managing editor last September after a 15-year run as co-anchor of NBC's Today show, she famously became the first woman to hold that solo anchor position. Behind the scenes, she also became a driving force behind CBS's newly enhanced health and medical coverage.

"I told [my producers], 'We must have a strong medical unit,'" Couric says. In response, they've "really beefed it up, and I think we're getting ready to beef it up even more."

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan WebMD Health Contributing Writer



Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD
WebMD MEDICAL EDITOR

THE NEWS

Katie Couric both breaks and makes health headlines—and she's committed to broadcasting her passion for prevention, new research, and resources



JENNIFER ALTMAN/CONTOUR PHOTOS

It's no wonder that Couric, who has evolved from local reporter to perky morning host to prominent evening news anchor, is passionate about the subject of health—and her mission to raise awareness of preventive screenings and an ever-growing list of educational resources.

Couric's life has been touched repeatedly, and at times tragically, by serious health issues. She lost her husband, television legal commentator Jay Monahan, to colorectal cancer in 1998, just a few short months after his diagnosis. Her sister, Virginia State Senator Emily Couric, died in 2001 from pancreatic cancer. And just last year Couric revealed that her 86-old-father, John, has long battled Parkinson's disease, the condition that damages nerve cells in the brain and affects the body's muscle function and balance.

And so, it seems, she can't help but see health issues from both sides of the news desk—as a reporter intent on delivering the latest breakthroughs in medical research to her audience, and as a wife, mother, sister, and daughter who understands what it's like to feel overwhelmed by a diagnosis, to search for answers and the best treatments, and to need expert guidance.

Which is one reason that medical coverage has become the cornerstone of her CBS *Evening News* broadcast. And she's convinced that her viewers are hungry for it.

"When you ask consumers what they're interested in, health and medicine are right up there at the top," Couric tells WebMD. That's a total transformation, she adds, from the days when people knew little about their own bodies, felt powerless to question their doctors, and rarely read medical headlines. "I think there's been a real sea change in the way medical care is consumed. Patient advocacy is a relatively new phenomenon, and now it's more collaborative."

She says several factors have played a role in the switch: Managed care has forced patients to learn more about their health; the Internet has made it possible to learn about everything from tonsillitis to trauma; and the all-powerful baby boomers—trying to defy the inevitable—are doing whatever they can to combat aging to ensure that they have long, healthy, active lives.

So it comes as little surprise that Cou-



Despite constant media scrutiny, Couric doesn't get stressed out in her high-profile position.

ric's viewers—an average 7.6 million a night—are eating up the news about their health. According to a CBS *Evening News* staff member, the network receives thousands of positive emails after health installments on the broadcast, a clear testament to the value that viewers place on medical information. Among the health topics recently broadcast were the decline in cancer deaths, the new cervical cancer vaccine, brain health, supplements, and ways to beat the high cost of prescription drugs. And in March, Couric will introduce a three-part series called "Bedside Manner," which focuses on improving

the communication between doctors and their patients.

If Couric can make her viewers more aware of risks, educate them about warning signs, and persuade them to get screened and tested, then she is achieving her goal, she says.

"I did a public service announcement once. It said: Don't end up saying 'If only.' Get tested," Couric says. "My husband was 41 when he got sick. He didn't even have a doctor. He thought—like so many people his age—that he was immortal. So my message is: You could be a statistic. And you don't have to be."

JOHN PAUL FLORES/BROADCASTING INC.

Behind the Scenes

After her husband's death, Couric used the connections she had made during her years in broadcasting to strengthen the fight against the nation's top two cancer killers—lung and colorectal cancer. She teamed up with Lilly Tartikoff (whose husband, NBC President Brandon Tartikoff, died of Hodgkin's disease at age 48) and the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the philanthropic heart of the entertainment industry, to form the National Colorectal Cancer Research Alliance in 2000. The NCCRA has recruited the country's top minds in science and medicine to work together toward creating more effective, less invasive diagnostic screenings and, eventually, finding a cure.

Since then, NCCRA public education initiatives and Couric's own colonoscopy on *Today* in 2000 have encouraged people to get screened. Right after her televised procedure and for a few subsequent months, colonoscopy screening in the United States jumped by nearly 20%. University of Michigan researchers, who studied the increase, nicknamed it "The Couric Effect." And according to the American Cancer Society, the colon cancer death rate dropped by more than that of any other major cancer in 2003–2004. The message is clear: Educating the public that colon cancer can be detected, prevented, and often cured has saved lives.

This sounds like a simple formula, but the business of empowering consumers about their health isn't always straightforward, and Couric says the media are sometimes to blame. "Often media go for the quick headline, and it's our responsibility to put it in perspective and not misrepresent studies," she says. "The tendency is to present these issues in black-and-white terms, and that often isn't the case."

Another media misstep is presenting medical news in doctor-speak. As something of a self-taught medical expert, thanks to her endless hours of research when Monahan was sick, Couric has a knack for explaining complex medical stories in layperson's terms. "I had to quickly learn extremely complicated medical concepts, and I had to learn how to ask the right questions," she says. "I think I was

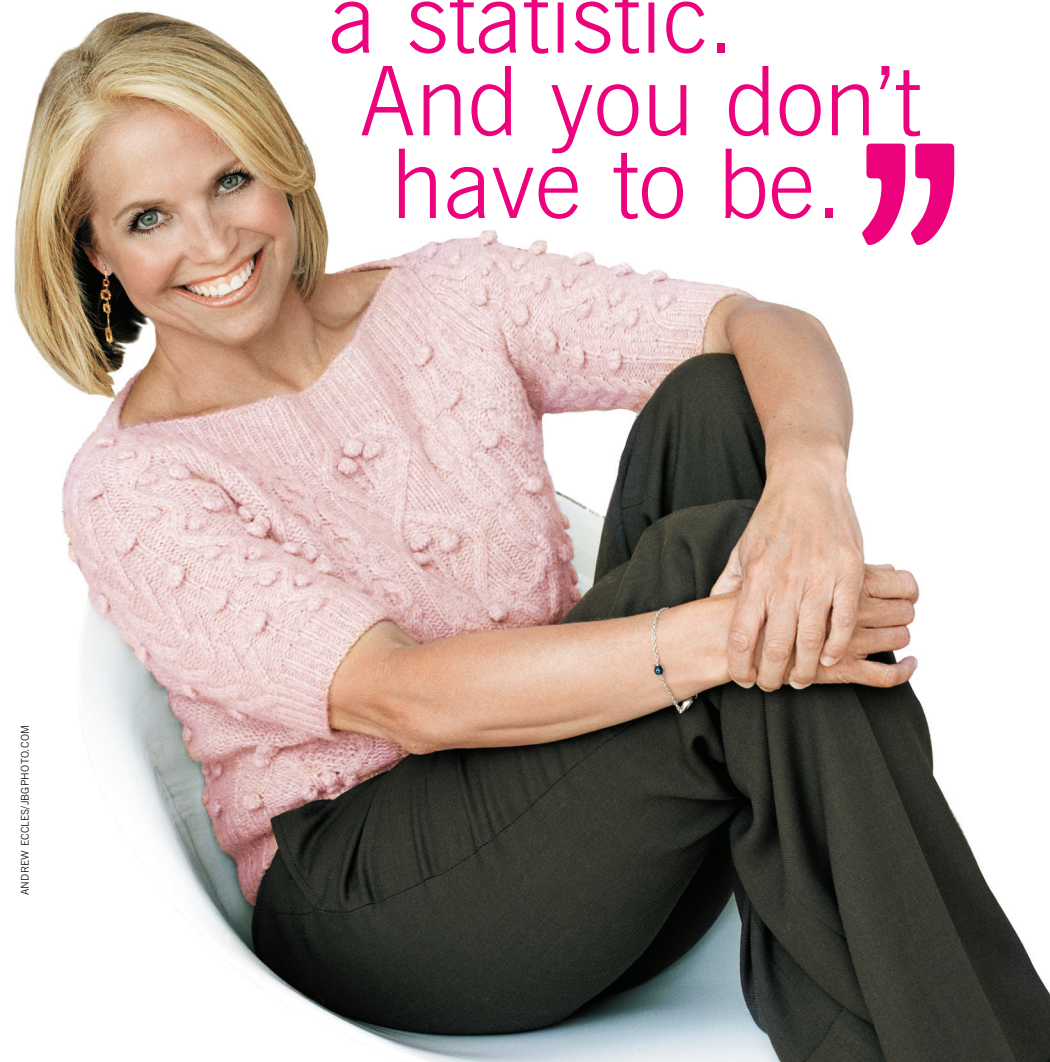
able to synthesize these concepts and distill them for myself, and that helps me explain them to others."

Couric is interested in almost any medical issue, and she sees it as her job to attack misconceptions about medicine and share reliable information in an easily digestible way. She now has several platforms in which to do that: her 22-minute evening broadcast; the Couric & Co. blog (on which she covers everything from her minister's sermon about doubt and questioning, to how to go green in your home); and online outlets such as YouTube, where her exclusive interview last October with Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's, has been viewed by more than a half million people. (CBS has also teamed with WebMD.com's team of journalists to find



Couric with her late husband, Jay Monahan.

“ My message is: You could be a statistic. And you don't have to be. ”



ANDREW ECCLES/IBPHOTO.COM



JENNIFER GRAYLOCK/PHOTO

COLORECTAL CANCER IS ONLY ONE OF COURIC'S CONCERNS

KATIE'S CAUSES

While Katie Couric's name has come to be synonymous with colorectal cancer prevention, her health outreach extends even further. She spends a good deal of her time talking about and supporting the health issues that have affected her personally.

Cancer is a primary concern for the CBS news anchor. In addition to doing groundbreaking work with the NCCRA (www.nccra.org), she helps raise money and awareness for pancreatic cancer. In 2001, just a few years after Couric lost her husband to colon cancer, her older sister, Emily, died from pancreatic cancer at age 54. Couric also serves as an honorary board member of Gilda's Club, which provides meeting places for families living with cancer.

Her efforts in the fight against cancer have earned Couric awards. She received the American Cancer Society's 2006 Medal of Honor for Cancer Control for raising public awareness about colorectal cancer.

Other awards on her mantel include the Harvard School of Public Health's highest honor, the Julius B. Richmond Award, which she received in 2003 for her cancer advocacy efforts. (The award pays tribute to an individual who, like its namesake, a former U.S. surgeon general, promotes and achieves high standards for public health for people most at risk.) In 2000, Couric received a George Foster Peabody Award for her five-part series on NBC's *Today*, "Confronting Colon Cancer."

The mother of two has also been honored by the National Children's Cancer Society and received UNICEF's Danny Kaye Humanitarian Award in 2003 for her work in raising awareness of UNICEF's mission for children around the world. She has supported such organizations as the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which grants wishes to sick children, the Alzheimer's Association, and amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research.

After an interview late last year with actor Michael J. Fox, Couric revealed to viewers that her father also has Parkinson's disease, the progressive neurological condition. To help find a cure for this disease, Couric has donated money to the Michael J. Fox Foundation (MJFF) for Parkinson's Research.—Denise Mann



TIM BOYLES/GETTY IMAGES

Top: Couric with Greg Kinnear, James Taylor, and John Legend at an EIF event; above: addressing the American Cancer Society.

and develop the best health news for her broadcast.)

Noting the multiple other sources of health information available, Couric says she can't even remember what the world was like without facts and figures at one's fingertips. "What did people do when they wanted to research?" she says, laughing. "Did they go to the library and look it up in the Dewey decimal system?"

The blessing of the information age is that Google pulls up 18.5 million hits for "colon cancer" in less than a tenth of a second. But the problem, says Couric, is that many of the links are not particularly legitimate. Just as it is worth taking the time to find a doctor who is a good match, Couric says it is worth taking the time to identify websites that provide accurate, updated information and put it in perspective for consumers.

These outlets are critical not only for providing facts about diseases, testing, and prevention, Couric says, but also for the emotional support. "I wish I knew about websites like WebMD when Jay was sick. For those hungry for information and for a connection, I think places like that—with chat rooms and online communities—are invaluable."

Couric says she felt incredibly isolated and lonely during that period. "It would have been great to say, 'Hey, does anyone know about this clinical trial?' It might have helped me at least feel like I wasn't doing it alone. When you or someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, you're thrust into this world of difficult choices. It's a very jarring and scary experience."

When it comes to choosing her own doctors, Couric places a premium on "personal referrals and geographic desirability. In our hectic lives, we don't have time to travel 40 minutes to get to a doctor. My doctor is nearby, and the girls' pediatrician is just a few blocks away. I'm lucky—I have access to some of the best doctors in the country through my work, but there are so many fine doctors out there. Ask your friends. The comfort level you feel with physicians is so important. You need to establish a relationship with the doctor so you are comfortable talking about your

symptoms and underlying reasons that might not otherwise come up. It's important to feel like that doctor cares."

Healthy Attitude

Finally adjusted to a new work schedule (broadcasting in the evening instead of the early morning), Couric says her own health care plan focuses on attitude as she continues to juggle single motherhood with her job and her advocacy commitments.

"I try to take care of myself, but I don't spend my time worrying about things," she says one afternoon from her studio, between bites of Rice Krispies. "More than ever, I appreciate getting up and feeling well. When you and your family are healthy, that's such a gift. I try to be mindful of that all the time."

Admittedly, Couric, who turned 50 in January, is no health nut (and never met a cookie she didn't like), but she tries to stay healthy and exercise, including practicing yoga. When it comes to feeling good, though, her trump card is sleep. "Sleep is very underrated," she says. "I love to sleep and try to make sure I'm getting enough. Ideally, it's eight hours but I could sleep 10." If she doesn't get enough sleep or misses a workout, Couric doesn't beat herself up. "If I eat two cupcakes I say, 'Whoops,' but I don't feel bad about it for two days."

She also says she doesn't get stressed out (except the kind on which she thrives). Certainly, there are stressful times—in January she was doing a *60 Minutes* interview with director, screenwriter, and blogger Nora Ephron and realized she had only 20 minutes to make it downtown to interview Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. No small task in New York City. (She made it.)

And she is definitely concerned about her daughters, already thinking about when her 11- and 15-year-old should be screened for colon cancer, given that their father had the disease. But Couric doesn't want to become obsessive about their health, or her own. Every night, the three of them eat dinner together after the broadcast.

"I want to set a good example for them, and I want to stay healthy for them,"

she says. "Modern medicine is truly remarkable, and if you take preventive measures—including mammograms, colonoscopies, cholesterol checks—you are your own best advocate. You have to make sure you'll be around as long as possible for the people who depend on you and the people you love." ●

TAKE THE TEST

you can take to your doctor

Colorectal Cancer Tests

Talk with your doctor about which colorectal cancer screenings are right for you.

Digital Rectal Exam: Your doctor uses a gloved finger to check the first few inches of your rectum. This test should be done annually, starting at age 50, for those at average risk.

Fecal Occult Blood Test or Fecal Immunochemical Test: Using a test kit that your doctor provides for home use, you'll collect small amounts of stool from three bowel movements to be tested for hidden blood. This test should be done every year starting at age 50 for those at average risk.

Flexible Sigmoidoscopy: A doctor inserts a thin, flexible, lighted tube called a sigmoidoscope into your rectum and lower part of your colon to examine the lining for abnormalities. Usually done every five years.

Colonoscopy: A doctor inserts a thin, flexible, lighted tube called a colonoscope into your rectum and colon. The colonoscope is attached to a video camera and monitor. During the procedure, the doctor can remove polyps and biopsy suspicious lesions. This test should be done at least every 10 years, starting at age 50.

Double Contrast Barium Enema: An X-ray image of the rectum and entire colon. This test is done every five years, starting at age 50.

Prevention is key to good health. Search "screenings" at www.WebMD.com.