Countless medical students nationwide did not need to set aside their class notes on Thursday nights to see the final episodes of ER, the perennially popular NBC television drama that depicted the lives of fictional emergency department staff at a Chicago teaching hospital. The Internet changed all that.

Equally popular with today’s audiences are Grey’s Anatomy (ABC), House (Fox) and Scrubs (from NBC to ABC). As an article in a 1998 issue of JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association noted, medical dramas have been a television staple for decades: Ben Casey and Dr. Kildare in the 1960s, Marcus Welby, M.D., and M*A*S*H in the 1970s, and St. Elsewhere and Trapper John, M.D., in the 1980s. Launched in the 1990s, the fact that ER consistently received healthy ratings is a testament to the ongoing popularity of the medical show genre.

What has changed in this decade is the audience’s ability to watch these shows not only when they are broadcast, but anytime they want thanks to digital recorders and video-on-demand through cable and the Web.

The same is true for medical education programs for healthcare professionals, like the ones broadcast on the Emmy Award-winning UCSD-TV and its sister satellite channel UCTV. Together, these channels reach a combined 22 million homes throughout California and the United States via broadcast, cable and Echostar Satellite’s DISH Network.

Remote control medical education has never been so popular, and today’s healthcare workers have near-real-time access via the Internet to critical information as the need arises. When expertise and knowledge of a particular problem crops up, medical practitioners can find the information for download. This applies to all levels of medical practitioners, from a medical specialist to a nursing aide, or even the non-expert viewer concerned about their health or a family member’s condition.
Both UCTV and UCSD-TV deliver documentaries, faculty lectures, cutting-edge research symposiums and artistic performances from each of the ten UC campuses. UCTV programs are broadcast live and on-demand 24 hours a day, seven days a week on the Internet using the latest in Web-delivery technology, including YouTube and podcasting. With approximately 1 million Web hits and 500,000 video downloads each month, programming from the University of California is clearly in demand.

For example, since 2003 "The Med Ed Hour" has provided up-to-date research and vital information to healthcare professionals, often with continuing medical education credit. More than 160 healthcare sites in 41 states and Canada access these programs via satellite. The show airs on UCTV and UCSD-TV every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at noon.

UCTV has also created a network that allows UC Medical Schools and Schools of Public Health to reach geographically diverse audiences with critical information to improve patient care as well as prepare for a public health emergency or respond to one. "Just in Case" programs explore a variety of health and medicine topics from centers of excellence throughout the University of California. "Just in Time" programs provide live information, in collaboration with California Department of Health Care Services, in response to an urgent public health crisis. These live/interactive programs showcase UC faculty expertise while providing vital information to healthcare professionals around the state and around the country.

The Med Ed Hour also aims to prepare health professionals, psychotherapists and family members to care for returning soldiers suffering from the unique combat hazards of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Presented by UC San Francisco and The Coming Home Project, the series "Treating the Invisible Wounds of War" discusses combat-related maladies such as PTSD, a major depression and traumatic brain injury, which is showing up in growing numbers as high as 25-40 percent.

For the lay public, UCSF's Osher Center for Integrative Medicine presents "Mini Medical School for the Public," a series of programs providing an opportunity to learn about health and the health sciences directly from UCSF faculty members and other nationally-recognized experts. As of the end of 2008, there have been 448,000 downloads of the series. In addition, the UCSF Center for Gender Equity and National Center of Excellence in Women’s Health presents "Women's Health Today," a live, monthly talk featuring experts on important women's health topics. As of December 2008 there have been a total of 326,000 downloads of the series.

UCTV was launched in 2000 to provide the public with programming that draws upon the vast intellectual, scientific and creative talents of the University of California. UC San Diego created UCSD-TV 15 years ago, and is now available to 1 million homes. Both stations are administered by UC San Diego Extension.