

Insurance Times: Insurers hire Hollywood agency to boost image

July 23, 2002. Vol. XXI No. 11

LOS ANGELES — The health care industry, tired of playing the bad guy in movies such as "John Q" and TV shows like "ER" and "Chicago Hope," has hired an agent to help get better roles.

The American Association of Health Plans, which represents more than 1,000 health maintenance organizations, has signed with the William Morris Agency.

The AAHP hopes to help "build bridges" with writers, producers and directors and exert some influence on plot lines and scripts.

"What we're trying to do is get a level playing field. We're not saying it's verboten to attack some part of the health care system. We're saying there is another side to what we do," Mark Merritt, senior vice president of the AAHP, said.

Movies and TV shows in recent years have portrayed dedicated doctors fighting heartless hospital administrators and bean-counting health insurance companies.

Earlier this year, "John Q," starring Denzel Washington, told the story of father who cannot afford a heart transplant for his son and holds an emergency room hostage.

Instead of attacking the film, the AAHP bought ads deflecting the focus of anger from insurance plans to "a runaway litigation system and expensive government regulations."