

In a season of Covid, the stylish cast members of *Married to Medicine* face some stark realities.

HIGH-HEELED HEALERS



From left: Dr. Heavenly Kimes, dentist; Dr. Simone Whitmore, OB-GYN; Toya Bush-Harris, Dr. Contessa Metcalfe, family medicine specialist; Dr. Jacqueline Walters, OB-GYN; and Anila Sajja.

In its eighth season, *Married to Medicine* has been capturing history as its doctors have battled the Covid-19 pandemic. Of the six principal cast members — all diverse women — four are physicians and the other two are married to M.D.s (and two of the couples are husband-and-wife doctors). So, for everyone involved in this popular Bravo reality series, the stakes have never been higher.

"We had to think about doing things differently," says Salena Rochester, vice-president of current production and development at NBCUniversal. "I felt a sense of duty to ensure that we told their stories about dealing with Covid in a real way, in addition to addressing the racial injustice that was happening in the country at the time."

Filmed last summer in Atlanta, *Married to Medicine* — normally a lighthearted series fueled by castmates throwing shade — took a dramatic turn as the doctors faced the perils of the coronavirus in a city besieged by civil unrest.

"Most of the cast members have sons," notes OB-GYN Jacqueline Walters, aka Dr. Jackie, "so watching the events surrounding the death of George Floyd was impactful. The men got a chance to talk to their sons and hear how they were processing everything."

In late August, the doctors traveled to D.C. to participate in the March on Washington, and they administered Covid tests onsite. Add to that the pressure of treating patients amid the chaos, and it all carried a heavy weight. "Babies didn't get the memo that we're having a pandemic out here," quips Dr. Jackie, who relied on her show sisters for emotional support.

"We've been together for so long," she says. "I get to share about work because Dr. Simone [Whitmore] is also an OB-GYN. We all talk to each other, which helps. Most of the time, we wanted to cry about life and the pandemic, but we laughed, because it's medicine for the soul."

Fans expect the show to be entertaining, so it was crucial to strike the right tone for this challenging season. "It's a fun reality show about women and their lives, but these very important issues were affecting them," Rochester says. "I think we did a good job balancing the light with very serious topics."

When season eight premiered in March, it brought a new cast member, Anila Sajja. As a first-generation Indian-American and Georgia native, she offers a new perspective.

"We look for someone who has an authentic relationship with some of the other cast members," Rochester says. "Anila has a great personality and she fit right in. She's a mom, married to a busy doctor and trying to manage being a fashion blogger. Some of the other women don't take [her work] as seriously."

So is Anila a friend or foe? Dr. Jackie says, "Let's just call her a frenemy."

File that under: Good news for viewers who delight in watching tempers flare. —Hilary Hattenbach

Married to Medicine airs Sundays on Bravo; for catch-up viewing, go to Bravotv.com.