



NURSING STUDENTS SHOULD BE SEEN AND HEARD

by Sandy Summers

In our imperfect state of conscience and enlightenment, publicity, and the collision resulting from publicity are the best guardians of the interest of the sick.

—Florence Nightingale

Nursing students should be seen and not heard. Right? Wrong. You don't need to wait to take an active role in making sure that nursing thrives, or in improving public health. How do I know? Because in

early 2001 when I was a graduate nursing student, a small group of fellow students and I decided to form the grass-roots Center for Nursing

Advocacy. Motivated by the nursing shortage and the hospital short-staffing that fuels it, we were spurred into action by a proposed federal budget cut for nursing education and community health nursing. We were outraged that those who manage health care budgets seemed so unaware of all that nurses do, and how we save lives. Why would nursing budgets get cut in a time of crisis? Why was nursing so undervalued? We felt strongly that better understanding of the profession would lead to more social, political, and financial support, relieving the nursing shortage and improving health care. Our vision was a future where the world understood the value of nursing. Thus, The Center was born.



We are now an international nonprofit that informs the public what nurses really do. We analyze the media's treatment of nurses, discouraging harmful depictions of nursing and encouraging good ones. Our web site, www.nursingadvocacy.org, launched in 2002, serves as an information resource for anyone interested in nurses in the media. (See resources.) We also encourage the use of nurses as expert sources for the media, and our board and advisory panel include prominent nursing leaders.

Do you ever feel like friends or family members don't understand the importance of nursing? The media plays a key role in public perception, and people need to understand that nursing is about more than bedpans, hand-holding, and carrying out physician "orders." We believe that the nursing shortage can only be resolved by educating the public about what we really do. So we decided to focus our

efforts on improving the portrayal of nurses in the media, particularly television, which has an enormous impact on the public's view of health care and nurses.

Negative Portrayals of Nurses

The Center's first major project focused on the popular NBC television show *ER*. The show has generally portrayed nurses as competent (they expertly call out vital signs and hang IV bags), but they are still portrayed as subordinate to the heroic physicians who dominate the show. In November 2001, members of the Center discussed concerns about the show with the *ER* producer and medical advisor. They were receptive, but refused to commit to any specific changes. Still, this was a great opportunity to be proactive and to voice our concerns.

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ER will probably be the most popular health care show in TV history. Throughout its long run, the show has established itself as the world's most influential proponent of the handmaiden myth. Its cast features ten physicians to one nurse, whereas real Level One trauma center ratios are closer to 1:1. ER nurses are subordinates who credit physicians for patient outcomes. ER almost never focuses on nursing care, except to the extent it shows physicians performing nursing tasks. When viewers see ER's physicians defibrillate for the hundredth time, they are going to believe it's the physicians who do it in real life as well, and not the nurses. A more realistic depiction of nurses in action would go a long way toward recruiting into the profession.

Historically, the media has largely portrayed nurses as sex objects, battleaxes, unskilled angels, or handmaidens. The seminal work of nursing scholars Kalisch and Kalisch documents how these pernicious media images evolved throughout most of the twentieth century.² Today the handmaiden stereotype remains a staple. It dominates television sitcoms like NBC's *Scrubs*, and even serious dramas like Lifetime's *Strong Medicine*.

The print media is somewhat better, but not nearly good enough. Periodicals frequently deify physicians but ignore or marginalize nursing. The 1997 *Woodhull Study on Nursing and the Media* and a 1991 Buresh, Gordon, and Bell study found that nurse experts appeared in 1%-4% of the health-related news articles analyzed.^{3,4}

In mid-2003, the Center started a campaign protesting a Clairol Herbal Essences television commercial which showed a nurse abandoning her patient to wash her hair, and then dance around in ecstasy. In June, Procter & Gamble apologized and promised to stop running the ad, which it did. In October 2003, we started a letter-writing campaign after ER aired a particularly damaging episode, and the campaign received extensive press coverage worldwide. Our campaign to persuade the NBC soap opera *Passions*

to end its use of an orangutan to play private duty nurse "Precious" (yes, really...) has also received significant press coverage.

Positive Portrayals of Nursing

We encourage support for positive depictions of nurses, such as *Reader's Digest's* excellent September and October 2003 articles on the nursing shortage; the recent HBO film version of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; and the recent nursing uniform exhibit at the Fabric and Workshop Museum in Philadelphia. (See Resources). Each year, we award the ten best depictions our Golden lamp awards, and we also identify the ten worst media depictions.

When Nurses are Undervalued

Just what is the impact of the media? Substantial. Consider ER. In a 2002 Kaiser Family Foundation study, one-third of regular ER viewers considered information they saw on the show when making health care decisions.⁵ The study concluded that entertainment media products like ER should be as accurate as possible in order to educate the public about health care and avoid dangerous misperceptions. And a 2000 focus group study by JWT Communications found that youngsters' strongest impressions of nursing came from watching ER.⁶ Unfortunately, respondents knew more about the ER nursing characters' personal lives than their professional ones. They considered nursing "a girl's job," rather than a profession. Those in private school felt they should aim higher than nursing.

When decisionmakers at health care facilities undervalue nurses, the result is often short-staffing. Recent studies by the University of Pennsylvania's Linda Aiken and colleagues indicate that short-staffing increases patient mortality and drives nurses from the profession.⁷ Budget cuts affect the resources of institutions that educate nurses like you. It contributes to the faculty shortage, limits advances in nursing research

and practice, and affects the quality of your education.

Taking Action

What can you do to empower the image of nursing? Become involved in letter-writing campaigns to the media, including starting your own. Explain to your friends and family all that nurses do. Support groups working to address the problems nurses and patients face.

NSNA encourages Image of Nursing committees on the state and local level. You can conduct image projects, celebrate National Student Nurses' Day, and, for any state or school newsletter editors out there, start an image column in your publication or on your web site.

You have no doubt often heard that you are the nursing leaders of tomorrow. It's time to rise to the challenge and, in the name of nursing's image, be nursing leaders now. ■

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