

LETTERS *to the editor*

The "Write On" column is intended as a forum for students to respond to articles in *Imprint* as well as issues in nursing today. Did you like something? Dislike it? Please send your letters to: nsna@nsna.org, att. WRITE ON.

I am a [male] nurse

An Op-Ed by Larry Slater, President, Alabama Association of Nursing Students for this month's issue on how nursing has changed – and what still needs changing.

I am male.

I am a nurse.

Therefore, I am a male nurse...right?

Okay, so technically speaking I am not a nurse yet, though in less than a year I will join the ranks of those proud to put "RN" behind their name. But the argument remains the same. In February 2006, the *American Journal of Nursing* ran an editorial titled "I Am Not a Male Nurse" (Schwarz). The editorial discussed a campaign by the Oklahoma Nurses Association to recruit men into the nursing profession (Schwarz, 2006). There was an overwhelming response, as evidenced by the numerous letters the journal printed in its June 2006 edition. So why does the term "male nurse" get so many people riled up? What are its negative, and perhaps even positive, connotations?

While I may be in the minority among my male nursing colleagues, it does not anger me to be called a male nurse. I agree with those who say we are nurses first and foremost and that "male" is an unnecessary modifier, as it does not qualify what we do. However, we are in (or are entering into) a profession that for over a century was predominantly female. The "ideal" image of the female nurse was ingrained into the fabric of our society, and to change such an image can take generations. To effect this change, men need to be active and visible throughout the nursing profession. And being visible — to our patients, to our colleagues, and to the general population — may require our being called, at least for a while, male nurses.

So when I am called a male nurse by friends, relatives, or patients, the teacher in me perks up and smiles. When I tell people that I am in nursing school, I will often hear, "I had a great male nurse" or "My mother

was in the hospital and was really happy with her male nurse." I simply start by saying, "Oh, were they happy that they were male or that they were a great nurse?" Then they will usually smile back, understanding exactly what I meant.

According to the March 2004 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, there were an estimated 165,840 male nurses in the United States (5.7% of the total nursing population). This represents an increase of 13.9% from March 2000, much greater than the 7.6% increase in the female nursing population over the same period. As the number of male nurses continues to increase in the coming years, the impact of men in nursing will become more apparent. As people realize the necessity of male nurses to help alleviate the nursing shortage, as people experience first-hand the tremendous skills that male nurses possess, and as people see and appreciate the excellent care that male nurses provide for their loved ones, we nursing men will no longer be considered an oddity but an integral and important asset to the nursing profession.

How long will this take? At what point will distinguishing me as a "male" nurse seem unnecessary and trivial? This may not occur in my lifetime. I may have to endure, with pure delight, those teaching moments that arise when I am called a male nurse. I look forward to each and every time; but I still dream of that glorious future where everyone will remember the care I gave and just say, "I had a great nurse." ☺

References:

Schwarz, T. (2006). I Am Not a Male Nurse: Recruiting efforts may reinforce a stereotype. *American Journal of Nursing*, 106(2), 13.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2004). *The Registered Nurse Population: National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (Preliminary Findings)*. Retrieved December 17, 2007, from <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/reports/rnpopulation/preliminaryfindings.htm>

Sincerely,
Larry Slater