Why Nurse Stereotypes Are Bad for Health

By THERESA BROWN, R.N.

My husband was working recently on a New York Times crossword puzzle when he called me over. “Hey, look at this one.”

The clue was “White-cap wearer” and the answer was . . . Nurse.

What?! There may be nurses in the hinterlands who still wear white caps, but no nurse I trained with or work with would be caught on the floor in a “nurse’s cap.” The outdated suggestion of wearing a cap raises the hackles of every nurse I know.

In the new book “Saving Lives: Why the Media’s Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk,” co-authors Sandy Summers and Harry Jacobs Summers explore the dated and false images of nursing that still persist in the media, ranging from popular television shows to the crossword puzzle. They cited a February 2007 Times puzzle that listed “I.C.U. helpers” as a clue. (The answer was RNs.)

“Helpers?” the writers asked with exasperated italics. That one word encapsulates their critique of how nurses are typically portrayed on entertainment television, in movies and in most journalism.

Nurses are not “helpers,” the authors argue. Nurses work with medical doctors, but not for them. Hospital nurses are hired and fired by other nurses, answer to a unit manager who is a nurse, and follow the protocols set by more senior nursing officers. Health care works best when doctors and nurses communicate, but the authors note that nursing is an autonomous profession and the formal management structure of most hospitals keeps M.D.’s and R.N.’s separate and independent.

Maintaining a nurse’s independent status is about saving lives, note the authors. “One of nurses’ most important professional roles is to act as an independent check on physician care plans to protect patients and ensure good care,” they write.

In nursing school, we hear over and over that keeping patients safe is a crucial part of the job, but we rarely see that role of nurses portrayed in the media. It’s not that doctors constantly make mistakes — they don’t. But in the ordered chaos of the modern hospital it’s good to have the person who spends the most time with the patient — the nurse — keeping a watchful eye on his or her patient’s care, and nurses feel that obligation heavily.

Sandy Summers was an emergency department and intensive care nurse herself for many years and now runs a nonprofit advocacy organization called The Truth About Nursing. Her co-author, Harry Jacobs Summers, is a lawyer and senior adviser for the group.
“Saving Lives” is an important book because it so clearly delineates how ubiquitous negative portrayals of nursing are in today’s media, particularly three common stereotypes of nurses — the “Naughty Nurse,” the “Angel” and the “Battle Axe.” They argue that these images of nursing degrade the profession by portraying nurses as either vixens, saints or harridans, not college-educated health care workers with life and death responsibilities.

The popular medical television shows “ER,” “House,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” “Private Practice” and “Scrubs” receive the bulk of the authors complaints. They list numerous examples of nurses acting as “helpers” in these TV programs rather than autonomous and knowledgeable professionals. The writers also contend that these shows go out of their way to denigrate nurses and insult nursing as a profession. In one episode of “Grey’s Anatomy,” for instance, a male doctor insults a female doctor by calling her a nurse.

Another problem is that popular television shows often show doctors doing nurse’s jobs: giving medications, checking I.V.’s, educating patients about treatment, and providing ongoing emotional support from shift to shift. Of course, the focus of the storyline is often on the physician, so it may simply be easier to write and follow if the doctors do all the work. A notable, but still controversial, exception is the new Showtime program “Nurse Jackie,” which features Edie Falco as a capable and assertive nurse, although she’s also highly troubled and hardly a role model.

The problem with how nurses are portrayed in the media is that it has the potential to devalue the way we view nurses in the real world. The result is less support for important policy issues like short staffing and nurse burnout.

I certainly never expected my beloved New York Times crossword to reinforce an outdated nursing stereotype. White-cap wearer, indeed! Nurses don’t need headgear to show the world what we do. It’s what’s inside of our heads that counts.

Theresa Brown is an oncology nurse and a regular contributor to the Well blog.

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- Feeling Strain When Violent Patients Need Care
Nurses are the only professional I know of that have no rights. We never know when we go to work, if we will be there 8 or 24 hrs—it is illegal to leave if no one replaces you. Some institutions just don’t bother to fill the next shift, to save money. Lunch is taken from our pay, we are even forced to punch in and out—often at a time clock so far away, walking there and back uses up the whole 1/2 hour, but there is no time to eat at all usually. Or even go to the bathroom. Many nurses suffer from bladder problems, as well as wrecked backs. Short staffing destroys your body and is dangerous for the patients. It means you are doing the job of two or three nurse, the unit clerk (fired), secretary (fired) receptionist (fired) maintenance man and cleaning staff, also fired. And maybe even putting together sandwiches and spoon feeding, and doing the work of aides who are also working short or don’t want to work. The public should ask themselves—when jobs are short and nursing pays well and has work, why people won’t nurse? That tells you something right there. Not to mention, constant forced free overtime, too, and being snooped, spied on and accused of everything under the sun. And as for those big paychecks? That is only in big cities on the Coasts, and mostly in specialities such as ICU. In other areas, RNs are often paid $10 an hour—about the same as secretaries. Personally, I would rather take it easy and type.

— Shen

There are stereotypes about everything and everyone . . . get over it!

— Lily

on the flip side, “HawthoRNe” is an awful portrayal of nursing and doctor-nurse interactions as well. Even though the nurses are portrayed as competent and patient advocates, the hierarchy is still set in the old fashioned nurse-as-underling stereotype. There is constant fighting between doctors and nurses, and doctors are shown as incompetent and power hungry. This show is just as bad at showing what real medical care is like as shows that depict nurses as helpers. In the real world, doctors and nurses work together, each within their own roles and, mostly, to their best abilities. I have found that nurses can be
awesome teachers, function as an integral part of the team, and hospitals certainly cannot run without them. I haven’t seen Nurse Jackie, but in HawthoRNe, the “modern” version of powerful competent nurses still does a disservice to the profession because of the context it’s set in.

(by the way, as a female med student, I get called “nurse” or am asked if I am going into nursing constantly. I find this insulting, not because I have anything against nurses, but because I am presumed to be in nursing school simply because of my gender. My male classmates never encounter this. It is disgusting how stuck in gender stereotypes people are.)

— med student

4. 4. July 1, 2009 4:10 pm Link

I could not agree with you more. Nursing tends to be the most stereotyped profession out there. I often have lay people tell me that they had no idea what a nurse actually does until they ended up in the ICU, or delivered their first baby. The media either completely ignores nurses, or paints them all with the same ignorant brush. The Nurse Jackie show is no exception to stereotyping nurses as over-sexed and over-served.

http://www.realityrounds.com

— Reality Rounds

5. 5. July 1, 2009 4:13 pm Link

TV doesn’t represent real life? Shock! Horror! Nurses definitely deserve their due, but complaining about TV is like complaining about the weather.

— Nutjob

6. 6. July 1, 2009 4:24 pm Link

I think nurses are the key to good care in the hospital. And I would NEVER devalue their work.

I would like to suggest, however, that some nurses can contribute to a public perception that they are helpers rather than professionals. When was the last time you heard a doctor say to a new patient, “Hi sweety. I’m Joe (or Jane), your doctor.”? I might suggest that a more professional introduction might be “Hello, Ms. Smith. I’m Mr. Jones (or Jim Jones), your nurse.” Or introduce yourself as “Nurse Jones.”

— cynthia

7. 7. July 1, 2009 4:27 pm Link

Maybe you did not watch Nurse Jackie before you wrote this article. She is not a “capable and assertive” nurse. She is a drug addict, a liar, a sex addict, rude and disrespectful, etc. etc. In real life, she would have lost her license a long time ago. I would love to know how to get this show off the air and the word out that nurses are absolutely not like this and this behavior by a nurse would never be tolerated. It is ridiculous and frightening to think that someone might believe this nursing portrayal.

— Carol Stephenson

8. 8. July 1, 2009 4:37 pm Link

My daughter just graduated with a B.S. in nursing, and having passed a challenging licensing test, is now an RN. Her training was rigorous: tests in which only a perfect score would allow her and her classmates to continue in the nursing program, long clinical hours working in hospitals, and constantly, the reminder
that as nurses THEY are the patient advocate. THEY are responsible for the patient’s care and well-being.

Nurses are trained to observe subtle physical and psychological changes in patients that have an impact on care and recovery. Doctors just aren’t around enough to notice these changes. Not their fault in a busy world, but let’s notice the pros who notice things!

— Ann Melious
9. July 1, 2009 4:46 pm Link

Nurse Jackie is an example of a powerful and assertive nurse? She’s a sarcastic drug addict from the episode I saw.

Nurse’s need to get over their inferiority complex as far as I’m concerned – you’re getting upset over a crossword puzzle (whites caps and helpers? That’s the best you can find?) and jokes on television (which I should probably mention that television thrives on plays on stereotypes).

The reason people continue to make jokes about nurses is that they know they’ll get a response like this.

— Aaron
10. July 1, 2009 4:47 pm Link

I have had my baby in the NICU for almost 4 months now, and can add that in addition to protecting patients, our incredible nurses have been tireless advocates – they get to know their tiny patients so well, they recognize long before an MD if they are sick, or showing signs of improvement. They work with families to ensure that each patient is getting the best care. At different points in our stay, it was the nurses who did everything from convince doctors our child needed transfusions, or simply offer me a shoulder to cry on.

— mbh
11. July 1, 2009 4:48 pm Link

Actually the worst stereotypes about nursing are those that tie nursing to femininity and thus discourage men from becoming nurses. Considering the acute shortage of nurses, it should be a primary focus of the profession to de-gender nursing and encourage the other 49% of the population to consider becoming a nurse.

— Adam
12. July 1, 2009 4:52 pm Link

I have to agree with Theresa on this one. Nurses are clearly an integral part of the health care team. In my hospital we talk about how it’s really the nurses who take care of the patients. It’s well known how poor communication in health care puts patients at risk, but it’s not usually discussed in the context of doctor-nurse communication—and it should be more. It astounds me how little communication actually goes on between doctors and nurses in some settings. Doctors often (mistakenly) don’t think it’s important and nurses are often way too busy. It’s a real problem.

http://happinessinthisworld.com

— Alex Lickerman, M.D.
13. July 1, 2009 4:57 pm Link
I’m puzzled, as I had always thought that the job of a nurse WAS to help the doctors around her. How is it relevant that nurses are supervised by other nurses? Secretaries in corporate America are commonly overseen by a head secretary, but that doesn’t negate the fact that the primary jobs of all secretaries is to assist the person/people to who they’ve been assigned.

If your general point is that nurses are hardworking people who deserve more respect than they get, I completely agree with you. But I don’t think you should argue that it is not the job of nurses to assist doctors.

— B.B. Liu


Nurses certainly have a tough job: long hours, high levels of stress, missed breaks and not enough appreciation!

— Drew Walker

15. 15. July 1, 2009 5:01 pm Link

Thanks for this needed report.
As a retired nursing professor and clinical nurse, I continue to be appalled by the way nurses are portrayed on TV and in the news. It goes from bimbo to doctor’s assistant. And the health care practices are many times way off base, if not just wrong.
Many of today’s nurses have not only BSN degrees, but also Master’s degrees in a nursing specialty. They are prepared to manage in the most critical hospital situations as well as in wellness programs in the public health arena. We would not be in the dilemma we are in now if nurses had been involved in health care planning many years ago. They are on the front line and hear and see what patients and their families are going through.
I recently talked with a media journalist about one of the new TV shows coming out about the image of the nurse – drug user, tough talking, (but supposedly compassionate) practitioner. I asked him if he knew that nurses can lose their license for drug use? Yes, he did, but I needed to understand that it was her personal life that was what the program was about. I didn’t get a chance but wanted to ask him if he wanted that nurse to take care of his dying grandmother or his new born premie baby? The nurse’s associations are active in fighting this image, but big money talks, and the public doesn’t know the difference until they or one of their loved ones gets sick and needs a nurse

— edmele

16. 16. July 1, 2009 5:04 pm Link

I think we have bigger fish to fry in the troubled American health care system than how nurses are portrayed in the popular culture: I’m a paramedic working in a hospital ER; as far as I’m concerned, nurses have to understand that the current nursing shortage plus an ever increasing patient census are only going to get worse for as far as we can see into the future. In the interest of quality patient care, those who control hospitals (i.e. nurses) had better make room for other trained providers. The same arguments that nurses had with doctors twenty and thirty years ago, about expanding the scope of practice for nurses, etc., some of us are having with nurses today.

— Frank Drew

17. 17. July 1, 2009 5:09 pm Link
Excellent article.

I think eliminating those stereotypes and accurately portraying nurses (including the wide variety of roles nurses have) and other health professionals such as physician assistants are key to solving some of our healthcare problems in this country.

Pretty much any non-high risk pregnancy can be handled by a Certified Nurse Midwife. Most primary care needs can be furnished by PAs and NPs... just as well as an MD/DO. Anesthesia can be administered by CNAs and AAs in a majority of cases. All without any drop in standards of care.

— Sara

18. 18. July 1, 2009 5:18 pm Link

I have been consistently impressed by the competence, professionalism and kindness of the nurses and other non-physician staff at hospitals. I’m fortunate that I’ve not had to interact with them often, but they have always put me at my ease and kept me safe and sound while I was in their care. So thanks. (I never paid much mind to the hats, though!)

— bdbd

19. 19. July 1, 2009 5:19 pm Link

We should also give at least as much weight to the policy views of nurses organizations about health care.

I seem to recall that at least one major nursing organization, The California Nurses Association, supports single payer health care.

— Wonks Anonymous

20. 20. July 1, 2009 5:19 pm Link

I’ve noticed the abundance of “hospitals staffed only by Doctors” on tv. If it wasn’t for nurses, my own job would be extremely difficult. They are the ones who notice that family never visits and wonder who will help care for patients after discharge. Often, nurses become part of the furniture in a patient’s room which allows them to overhear conversations, become concerned, and call the social worker to offer assistance. In short, I heart Nurses!

I’d like to complain for my own profession as well. Social workers only show up to snatch children away when, in reality, that is usually the smallest part of our job in a hospital setting. Grey’s watching ended for me when one of the doctors was counseling a patient on adoption…all the docs I work with with wouldn’t have been able to write “social work consult” fast enough!

— Hospital Social Worker

21. 21. July 1, 2009 5:23 pm Link

Dear Theresa,

You had me until near the end.

Please do not cite Nurse Jackie as a “capable and assertive nurse”. She is drug addicted, has sex in the pharmacy, and is a vigilante who throws away another patient’s ear because she doesn’t like him.
If Nurse Jackie were as assertive as she was capable, she would have pushed harder until the kid that she knew had a head bleed got proper treatment. She was not assertive, she took the denigration the training MD gave her. The patient died because of both the doctor’s error and her inability to get the patient adequate attention.

For the record,

Nurses don’t wear white hats.
Nurses don’t do drugs at work.
Nurses don’t ignore important symptoms because an inexperienced doctor tells them not to worry.
Nurses have college degrees and manage critical situations.
Good doctors appreciate good nurses.

Ughh.

— Donna, RN

22. 22. July 1, 2009 5:23 pm Link

It is true that nursing has been subjected to sterotypical denigration for a long time, which the media have certainly promoted. However, our worst enemy is our own leadership. Can we really be considered a serious profession when there is no standard of preparatory education or requirement for certification? The public knows what is required to become a physician or a lawyer, but the term “nurse” is used so commonly from CNA to PhD, that it loses all gravitas. One can be an RN, but the education could have been obtained from a two year, four year, three year hospital course or even graduate program, without any distinction. When there are no standardized requirements, then how can we be deemed a true profession, worthy of respect? Couple that with the way nurses in general have been portrayed and disparaged for years, and it is understandable that we are often regarded as the “doctor’s helpers,” rather than an integral component of the health care delivery system. I hope someday soon, it will be appreciated that nurses and physicians are partners, and not adversaries in the care of all our patients.

— Elaine Allendorf, RNP,MS,MPH

23. 23. July 1, 2009 5:25 pm Link

Completed my BSN in 1982. While in school, my female colleagues wore caps with student stripes, but no headgear was suggested for “us guys.” The blue polyester smock tops we wore were butt-ugly, and clearly marked us as student nurses. Once out in the workplace, fewer and fewer of my co-workers continued to wear caps. By the time I left the acute care setting (late 80's) almost none of the BSN nurses I worked with still wore their caps, while the ADN nurses seemed more likely to continue the practice. Now in governmental public health, almost all the registered nurses I work with wear street clothes.

Just the other day I saw a woman “of a certain age” proudly wearing her nursing whites (down to hose and shoes) and nursing school pin – I would have been more impressed by her neat, professional appearance had she not been walking across the Wal-Mart parking lot!

— Nurse Jon

24. 24. July 1, 2009 5:30 pm Link

I have no idea how I would possibly take good care of my patients without the amazing nurses in the ERs
where I work.

As a female physician, I often get mistaken for a nurse by my patients and many others. Instead of taking offense, as if being mistaken for a nurse is somehow a put-down, I say “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m actually just the ER attending.”

— DVS

25. July 1, 2009 5:31 pm Link

Nurses may be an autonomous profession and perhaps their work involves keeping patients safe, but recent experience with hospital nurses indicates some serious problems among nurses.

Most direct patient care is now given by aides. Nurses’ contacts with patients are limited by workloads, administrative details and, increasingly, long 12 hour shifts.

Many nurses seem bored, alienated, even angry with their work settings.

Both my wife and myself have experienced barely adequate nursing care in recent hospitalizations.

In short the insane economics of American medicine is eroding nursing morale and care just as it its physician care

Jim

— Jim

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