

Book Review

Edited by Dean Whitehead

Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts us All at Risk by Sandy Summers & Harry Jacobs Summers (2009). Kaplan Publishing, New York. ISBN 9781427798459. 352 pp. US\$24.95.

Developed in the printing world in 1798 by Fermin Dedot, 'stereotype' was originally a metal cast which allowed a newspaper to reproduce quickly and cheaply many copies of a message. In 1922, journalist Walter Lippman coined the metaphor stereotype as a selection process used to organise and simplify perceptions society, and especially the media, hold of groups of people in an otherwise overwhelmingly complex world. Whether right or wrong, Lippman added 'the public's imagination is shaped by these "pictures in our heads"'. Consequently, they lead to stereotypes that are hard to shake'. However, sociologists argue that stereotypes have been with us a lot longer than any form of media, dating back to antiquity where groups often appeared as easily discernible embodiments of good and bad; therefore, they believe society creates stereotypes and the media reinforces them.

Arguably, nursing stereotypes have evolved in tandem with the development of the nursing profession, as a domestic art 1870-1890, as a religious calling from 1890-1920, skilled discipline 1920-1949, pool of expert managers 1940-1960 and pool of expert clinicians from 1960 to the present day. The common media representations of nurses range from the innocuous to the toxic – where nurses are portrayed in

visions such as the 'ministering angel' – that unblemished, otherworldly figure who hovers, frets and glows over a handsome wounded soldier. Then, there is the 'dumb nurse' – the infatuated, unwavering 'girl Friday' who feels privileged when doctor advises patients to 'cough towards nurse', or the 'saucy nurse' who revives patients with the necessary tools of the trade; frilly hat, pneumatic breasts, abbreviated skirt. Not to be forgotten, of course, there is also the buttoned down and ratchet 'battleaxe' who tortures whimpering patients into unbending ward routines.

However, leaders of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, the organisation at the forefront of challenging and changing representations of nurses and co-authors of this book refuse to accept print and broadcast media's reinforcement of nursing stereotypes as social reality or even as harmless fun. Instead Sandy Summers, herself an experienced Emergency Department and Intensive Care nurse, together with her co-author husband and lawyer, Harry Jacobs contend vehemently, in this telling book, that the portrayal of nurses by the media is exceedingly harmful; not alone to the nursing profession – but more crucially to patient care.

In the first two parts of this eye-opening media watch book – a microcosm of what is to be found on their website <http://www.nursingadvocacy.com> – the authors argue articulately that media images of nursing undermine the profession by portraying nurses as background fillers as opposed to university-educated, highly skilled and autonomous health care workers with life and death responsibilities. To address these

misrepresentations which threaten recruitment and retention of nurses, along with education, practice and research funding, the authors explain well what nursing really is and what nurses do. Summers and Jacobs send a very clear message in response to media held notions that a 'monkey can be a nurse' or that 'technology can replace nurses' – where they insist that 'technology can never fill all the critical roles nurses play. For instance, every time a nurse enters a patient's room, she observes his or her colour, demeanour, state of mind and speech. Any subtle change can signal trouble – none of the devices a patient is hooked up to can perform this job'.

Most laudable in this book is that the authors do not merely criticise the media's poor portrayal of nurses but in the concluding part they offer a blueprint on how to improve nurses' image. The authors appeal to each nurse to exercise their right to object when they encounter image degrading material by contacting media outlets directly. But they also identify that the responsibility for producing the correct message rests with nurses through how they interact with patients, how they dress and the language they use to promote their craft to society. If this book has any weaknesses, it would be that it did not carry a caveat indicating it is difficult for any intending or registered nurse to put down.

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