

## Is the media damaging nursing?

### **VIEWPOINT**

Nurse Sandy Summers and Harry Jacobs Summers  
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**In this week's *Scrubbing Up* Sandy and Harry Summers tell how stereotyping nurses as 'unintelligent sex symbols' is stiling global recruitment and creating a lack of patient respect.**

**The US nurse and her lawyer husband are so concerned about the portrayal of nursing in the media that they have set up their own non-profit-making organisation to combat stereotypes.**

Amid recent reports of nursing errors and neglect, some argue that nurses have become 'too posh to wash'.

They have supposedly forgotten their proper roles as devoted angels, physician helpers, and bedpan engineers.

Instead, they seek more university degrees, respect for their technical skills, and an expanded scope of practice.

**" The popular dramas *House* and *Grey's Anatomy* together have 20 major physician characters, but not a single nurse "**

Compassion and diligence are of course essential qualities in nursing.

But nursing is far more than that.

Nurses also save lives by monitoring patient conditions, intervening with cutting-edge technology, advocating for patients, and teaching them how to manage their health.

With more education, nurses can do even more.

Research shows that the care of advanced practice nurses is at least as effective as the care of physicians.

But under-staffing, resource shortages, and abuse undermine nursing practice daily.

The global nursing shortage is a public health crisis.

### **Unhealthy attitude**

Burned-out nurses have fled the bedside, and many wealthy nations have rushed to recruit foreign nurses.

Nurses today are asked to do a harder job with fewer resources, and research shows that low nurse-to-patient ratios are risking lives.

One big problem is the unhealthy media portrayal of the profession, which plays a key role in forming and reinforcing popular attitudes. Even television dramas affect the public's views and decisions about health care.

In a 2008 study, nursing scholars at the University of Dundee found that television images of nurses as 'brainless, sex mad bimbos' were discouraging academically advanced students from pursuing the profession.

**“ To resolve the nursing shortage, we must all learn what nurses really do ”**

Disrespect from decision-makers means too few nurses on the wards. Overworked nurses are less able to detect subtle changes in patient status, catch life-threatening errors, and give vital health advice. Disrespect encourages patients and physicians to ignore and even abuse nurses.

### **Drama portrayal**

The popular dramas House and Grey's Anatomy together have 20 major physician characters, but not a single nurse.

The shows' physician characters do many exciting things that nurses do in real life, from defibrillation to patient teaching to psychosocial care.

The few nurses who appear are meek subordinates who rarely speak.

Sometimes the smart, attractive physician characters mock nurses. Dr House, the godlike diagnostician, once joked that he had "created" nurses to clean up the mess. And Meredith Grey reacted this way to an insult by a male colleague: "Did you just call me a nurse?!"

Even the news media often ignores nurses' real contributions to modern health care.

Usually, elite press entities consult only physicians as health experts, even about topics that nurses know at least as well, such as preventative health and pain management.

And advertising relies heavily on regressive imagery, presenting nurses as deferential helpers or sex objects.

Earlier this year, a West Midlands bus company used a large naughty nurse ad, with the tag line 'Ooooh matron!', to promote its route to the hospital.

To resolve the nursing shortage, we must all learn what nurses really do.

Those who craft public policy and media content should raise awareness of nursing.

And nurses themselves must speak out about their work.

Of course specific instances of poor care should be addressed promptly. But in the long term, only an understanding of the true value of nursing will ensure that qualified, caring nurses are there to save us when we need them.

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