



The image of nursing: It's in your hands

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Who should take the lead in improving public understanding of nursing?

You.

Nurses must play the leading role. Nurses have the power -- and the responsibility -- to foster change for their profession. That's why we founded [The Truth About Nursing](#).

The first hurdle in this advocacy is self-image. Some nurses will need to focus first on believing in the profession and in their own power to make a difference.

We urge nurses to project a professional image in all interactions. When you meet a patient, introduce yourself as a nurse. Include your surname, as professionals do. That doesn't mean you have to be cold or formal. You can provide good psychosocial care *and* earn respect.

Consider telling patients what your role is, including your duty to advocate for them. And you might try "nursing out loud." This means describing more of what you're thinking while you're providing care, consistent with patient confidentiality and sensitivity. If you do, then patients, families, physician colleagues and others will get a better sense of your education and skill.

Educate colleagues. Nurses already teach physicians a lot about health care in clinical settings, but they could tell them more about nursing. Nurses might also reach out to medical schools to start joint learning or shadowing programs like [those we mentioned in our last piece](#).

The benefits of nursing care--which often involves preventing adverse events--can be hard for people to see. And some nurses have become expert at hiding their expertise. Please don't do that

quite so well! We're not saying nurses should brag, but don't let others get credit for nurses' life-saving work. If not for yourself, do it for your colleagues. We have designed a bumper sticker that tries to help people understand the value of nursing. It says: "Save Lives. Be a Nurse." Email us; we'll send you some.

Even your clothes affect how others see you. Some nurses wear scrubs with cartoon characters on them. Do many physicians or other professionals do that? We commend the nurses of Wales, who last year adopted professional uniforms so that they can be more easily identified.

Advocate for progress on public health matters, as the Royal College of Nursing has recently done on issues ranging from the scope of nursing practice to the proper "drink drive" limits. When nurses speak out, the public sees that they are committed, engaged health professionals. And don't be reluctant to let others know you are a nurse, as some nurses are once they gain positions of influence. Let people know that the articulate person they're listening to is a nurse.

Nurses must also help the media create better depictions of nursing. Build media expertise, establish relations with your local media, and get coverage for nursing at your workplace. Praise the media when possible. The Truth About Nursing issues annual awards for the best (and worst) portrayals of nursing it has seen in the past year. [Our 2010 awards just appeared](#).

Persuading the media to reconsider specific products is also important. It's not easy, especially when it comes to television, but it can be done. Consider phone calls, emails, and letter-writing campaigns. In trying to influence ongoing media portrayals, it's important to identify the key decision-makers, to collaborate with others when possible, and above all, to be persistent.

In 2007, [Cadbury Schweppes Canada ran television commercials](#) featuring female nurses hopping into bed with male patients who chewed Dentyne Ice gum. After extensive discussions with the company's Canadian affiliate proved unproductive, we launched a letter-writing campaign. The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario joined us. More than 1,500 letters later, the company still would not budge. So Sandy began leaving detailed voicemail messages for the top Cadbury Schweppes executives in the world. After a week, the CEO of Cadbury Schweppes called Sandy from London to discuss her concerns and to tell her he was pulling the ad.

Of course, no one knows nursing as well as nurses do. So nurses should create their own media, to explain nursing to the world.

Are you a writer? Consider letters to the editor, op-eds, feature articles, and non-fiction to explain nursing to the world. In 2005, U.K. nurse Claire Bertschinger published *Moving Mountains*, a book about her work caring for children in the 1980s Ethiopian famine--work that reportedly inspired the 1985 Live Aid benefit.

And fiction can be very influential. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books include the minor character Nurse Pomfrey, who is skilled at healing in a supernatural setting. But we need nurses

to put nursing center stage. Maybe Harry Potter could become a flight nurse; that broom would be pretty quick to accident scenes!

Even poetry can convey key elements of the nursing experience. The Los Angeles poetry magazine *Rattle* included a "Tribute to Nurses" in its Winter 2007 issue. The tribute featured nurses' own work: insightful essays and well-crafted, irreverent poems that captured modern lives and deaths without sentiment.

The Internet is a growing source of health information, and nurses must use it. Consider your institution's web site. These sites rarely highlight the work of nurses as much as they do the work of physicians. But hospitals exist mainly to provide nursing care, and nurses should work to make their web sites reflect that.

Despite the damaging examples we have seen, television is not a lost cause in the battle to improve the nursing image. Recent shows like *Nurse Jackie* and BBC4's *Getting On* have great potential to convey a more realistic vision of the nursing experience. And nurse-focused documentaries like the Channel 4 series now being filmed in Birmingham NHS hospitals can make valuable contributions.

When others do not understand the value of what nurses do, nursing cannot get the respect and resources it needs, and people suffer and die. But we can change that. As the philosopher Albert Camus once wrote, "tasks are called superhuman when humans take a long time to complete them, that is all. The first thing is not to despair." Together, we can create a world that allocates the resources nursing needs to save the lives of millions.

All we need is you.