



The image of nursing: The naughty nurse

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Nurses: when you're at work, do you often find that you're too busy having sex with physicians and patients to provide clinical care?

Don't worry, it's a common problem--in the media.

For decades, naughty nurse imagery has been a mass media staple around the world. It appears not just in sexually-oriented products and in advertising, but in Hollywood shows, popular music, and even the news media.

A 2006 poll by Budget Van Insurance found that 54 percent of British men had sexual fantasies about nurses--more than fantasies about any other profession. Nursing led a list of traditionally female, service-oriented jobs. By contrast, women's fantasies focused on traditionally male workers associated with heroism and/or socioeconomic power, including physicians and "firemen," who led that list at 47 percent. For men, it seems, to be the object of fantasies is a mark of power and prestige. For women, it is a mark of perceived submissiveness and low status.

The media both reflects and reinforces the naughty nurse stereotype. To some extent, the image may be a reaction to the apparently scary idea of females providing intimate care to vulnerable men. And as we often hear, those who use the naughty nurse are "just joking"! But the social contempt behind the image discourages practicing and potential nurses, undermines nurses' claims to resources, and encourages workplace sexual abuse -- a major problem for real nurses.

In a 2005 study, University of Missouri communications professor Debbie Dougherty found that more than 70 percent of the nurses she surveyed in four U.S. states had been sexually harassed by patients. In March 2006, Dougherty told the *Monster* website that "patients threatened to attack nurses sexually and called them prostitutes." In fact, in August 2004 the *Times* (UK) reported that in "some Asian cultures, nursing is considered on a par with prostitution."

The naughty nurse image persists at all levels of society. In December 2006, sometime Italian prime minister and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi found a novel way to thank his nurses at the Cleveland Clinic, where he had just had a pacemaker implanted: "Italian nurses are better-looking...These ones scare me a bit. Don't even think about leaving me alone at night with one of them."

Of course, there's nothing wrong with being seen as sexy--as long as that's not your dominant image in the workplace. An article published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* in late 2005, based on research by Lawrence University professor Peter Glick, suggested that more sexualized work attire lessens respect for women in responsible jobs like management, causing others to see them as less competent and intelligent. Constantly associating nursing with sex has the same effect.

Major corporations use the naughty nurse to sell alcohol, razor blades, cosmetics, shoes, and even milk. For example, Virgin Mobile India's 2008 "Think hatke" (Think differently) campaign included an ad in which a supposedly immobilized male hospital patient tricked

a scantily dressed female "nurse" into reaching around in his pants pockets, searching for his ringing cell phone.

And in 2005, Virgin Mobile Canada introduced a multimedia campaign with naughty nurse models who would supposedly help customers avoid "The Catch," a venereal disease associated with rival companies. Virgin tycoon Richard Branson frolicked in the snow with some of the "nurses" at the kickoff event in Toronto.

Hollywood still uses the naughty nurse, including the variation that presents nurses as desperately seeking romance with physicians. On *Grey's Anatomy*, nurse characters have often been vehicles through which female physicians confront latent fears about female subservience and sexual virtue. The show's male physicians sleep with the disposable nurses when there is trouble in their romances with female physicians, their real peers. In a May 2008 episode, the pathetic nurses actually boycotted one physician's surgeries because he had loved and left too many of them.

But it's not just hospital shows. In an October 2007 episode of *Desperate Housewives*, the character Gaby donned sexy nurse attire as an erotic excuse to rub lotion on her husband, to covertly heal a case of the crabs she had given him.

Of course, the naughty nurse has long been a major force in sexually-oriented products. But even the news media will exploit the image when it has an excuse. In September 2006, the *Daily Mail* (UK) broke some urgent news with its report, "Nurses Face Ban on Thongs and Cleavage." The piece explained that an Essex hospital was considering requiring nurses not to expose too much. And in case anyone could not quite picture it, the *Daily Mail* helpfully included a photo of Christina Aguilera in a naughty nurse ad for Skechers shoes, with this caption: "Sorry guys: don't expect to see the likes of Christina Aguilera in this nurses uniform at Southend Hospital."

At the end of 2006 and 2007, the *Sun* (UK) ran promotional tie-in pieces for Babes and Boys' annual naughty nurse calendars. The *Sun* pictorials featured the usual lingerie-nurse

outfits, but a key theme was that the models supposedly really *were* nurses. One "student nurse" told the *Sun* she posed for "a bit of a laugh" and "a bit of extra money." Plus, "People always joke about nurses looking saucy so it's fun to be the real thing."

The naughty nurse is also a bit of a pop music groupie. In 2005, electronic-alternative-pop duo Goldfrapp set a video for their single "Number 1" at a plastic surgery clinic where everyone but singer Alison Goldfrapp has a human body and a dog's head. In the video, Goldfrapp acts like a dog, dances with the clinic staff, and tells the song's tale of sexual obsession. The "nurses" are all females in short dresses who hand things to the all-male "physicians." The camera dwells on the nurses' bottoms--on which the physicians, at one point, playfully place their stethoscopes.

The naughty nurse image is a factor in the nursing crisis. So nurses should urge the media to reconsider its rampant use of the image. We just hope there's some other way to sell people mobile phone service. Think hatke!