

THE "ANGEL OF DEATH":

The Anatomy of 1980's Major News

by Philip A. Kalisch
Beatrice J. Kalisch
and Edith Livesay

Story About Nursing



PHOTO: Dale Wittner, Camera Five

"ANGEL OF DEATH," screamed the *New York Post* headlines, "Nurse Accused of Pulling Plug in Lethal Hospital Betting Scandal."

"'Angel' Cheered 'Death'?" queried the *Dallas Times Herald*.

"Nurse in 'Angel of Death' Case Charged with Patient's Murder," the *Chicago Tribune* reported.

Such were the sensational headlines announcing what proved to be the news media's most publicized story about nursing in 1980. The story was ugly. Reportedly, nurses in the intensive care unit of the Las Vegas Sunrise Hospital had been

making bets on the times of patients' deaths, stuffing the wager money in an envelope until somebody won. One nurse, calling herself "Death's Angel," was accused of tampering with patients' life-support systems to help her friends win the betting pool. Supposedly, six deaths were being investigated (though that number soon diminished to a single death). Additional rumors ran rampant, getting unprecedented coverage.

Newspaper, T.V., and radio journalists picked up the story rapidly, often couching it in lurid, emotional language. All across the country, in major cities and small towns alike, newspapers emblazoned the story on their pages, most often

on the front page. Speedy coverage by Associated Press and United Press International wire services got national and even international attention. Television reporters covered stories of the Death's Angel accusation on every major network; on morning, evening, and late night news; and on the news sections of popular shows like "Good Morning America." And Walter Cronkite, who has one of the highest credibility ratings of any man in the country, reported in rather sensational language, "Well, it seems like something out of fever level fiction—hospital employees, including a nurse nicknamed Death's Angel, betting on death in a kind of ghoulish pool—but these were the reports considered by a grand jury in Las Vegas." (CBS Evening News, 7 p.m., April 2, 1980) Jani Adams, the nurse finally named as the alleged Death's Angel, even appeared on the Tom Snyder talk show. It's hard to imagine how anyone could have missed this widespread and highly visible news coverage. People no doubt agreed heartily with the stunned response made by the executive director of Sunrise Hospital: "It makes me . . . sick," adding that the charges against the ICU nurses were "as serious as any that could be made in the health care profession." Certainly the public was offered one of the most negative images of nurses ever to appear in the news media.

As the story developed over the next three and a half months, however, it turned out that things were not what they had seemed, and ultimately the enormous media sensation was revealed to have been based on very little. But by then the reputations of nurse Jani Adams and Sunrise Hospital were badly, perhaps irreparably, damaged. Facts were slow to emerge in the Death's Angel case, and they created a changing picture of the situation with each new revelation. Only someone who followed the reports from beginning to end would have some idea of what really happened, and even then the whole truth would be impossible to determine, for the witnesses' testimonies were often contradictory.

First Reports

The circumstance which caused the whole "Death's Angel" case to become public was a change in personnel at Sunrise Hospital: the arrival of Barbara Farro on the night shift in the intensive care unit, where Jani Adams was the supervisor. Ms. Farro claimed that she overheard nurses discussing the death of a woman patient, mentioning that the woman's life support system had been tampered with, and naming Vincent Fraser as the Death Angel's next likely victim. Shocked, Ms. Farro said that she went to check on Fraser, found his "life signs" failing, and reported his condition to Jani Adams. Ms. Adams was playing cards at the time and reportedly replied, "We know. Don't worry about it." The same day, nurses asked Mrs. Fraser to sign her husband's mortuary release form, and the next day Mr. Fraser actually died. Putting all these incidents together, and recalling that she had seen nurses place money in an envelope that was passed around, Ms. Farro concluded—not unnaturally, perhaps—that nurses were betting on the patients' lives and actually murdering them to better the odds. She went to the police; the police apparently leaked the story to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*; the *Review-Journal* hastened into print with its "scoop" on March 13, 1980; and the scandal spread across the nation before the facts had been ascertained.

For more than a week, little new information came to light about what had actually happened in the hospital, but news people conscientiously buttressed their reports with as many facts as they could gather. Again and again they reported what was alleged to have happened. They named Jani Adams as the suspected Death's Angel, and said that her boyfriend, Bernard Deters, a respiratory therapist, was also suspended from his job as a suspected accomplice to Adams (a suspicion that was soon discounted). They quoted the hospital director's statement about the charges making him "sick." They quoted Ne-

vada's Governor Robert List as saying that he "would like to think the whole thing a figment of somebody's imagination but there appears to be a good deal of smoke and fire both." And they quoted the chief county health officer's opinion that "turning oxygen off periodically would weaken a patient's heart, causing the person to die hours later without the reason being directly attributed to the life support system." Others called the situation "grisly" or "bizarre" or speculated that it was the work of "a deranged person." That such statements were made is certainly fact, and the reporters could not be faulted for quoting them; but the ideas expressed in these statements were usually emotional responses to the roiling rumors. No one really knew yet just what had happened. However, the cumulative effect of daily reports about the rumored murders must have made a strong and unforgettable impression on the public.

Oddly enough, two of the most salient facts in the case emerged quite early but seemed to be ignored, perhaps because they didn't fit people's assumptions about what had happened. A UPI dispatch issued on March 15, only two days after the story broke, stated that the autopsies on the suspected victims did not indicate any foul play, and it also implied strongly that no evidence of betting had been found. The Death Angel, said the report, "apparently was more concerned about mercy death rather than winning what was in the envelope." And, indeed the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article, printed the same day, indicated that police had been "unable to find evidence [that] money changed hands" in the alleged betting scheme. Hence, the evidence did not seem to prove either a victim or a motive. However, subsequent articles did not reflect either of these facts for quite some time. Even newspapers that based their reports on the UPI wire failed to mention the autopsy findings, and the scandal continued unabated.

For the most part, reporters were careful to qualify their

descriptions of the case with words like "alleged," "reportedly," "suspected," "may have," and "investigation into charges that. . ." Nevertheless, the public quickly made the mental leap from alleged crime to proven crime as a flurry of indignant editorials and letters to the editor indicated. For ten days no new facts emerged, but the press ran daily articles, printing all these reactions, rehashing the allegations, and filling in background information about the characters involved. Such abundance of time combined with such dearth of hard fact would be ample breeding ground for sensationalism in any case, but in this case it only added to an already unusual combination of circumstances which magnified the impact of the story on the public and made easy copy for the journalists. The sensationalism surrounding the case was deplorable but also understandable.

Factors Contributing to Sensationalism

First of all, the location of the hospital in Las Vegas made the charges of betting totally believable. Most people's first (and perhaps only) mental association with the name "Las Vegas" would be "gambling." The name evokes images of compulsive gamblers who will bet on anything from the color of the next car rounding the corner to the odds on the sun's rising the next day. And, indeed, many of the early articles on the "Death's Angel" case described the hospital as being "just blocks from the glittering Strip in the nation's legal-gambling capital" (*Chicago Sun-Times*, March 15, 1980) or "a few blocks from the casino strip." (*Tucson Daily Citizen*, March 15, 1980) The hospital might just as easily have been described as only blocks away from a church, a saloon, or a museum, and no one would have drawn inferences about the hospital on that basis; but its proximity to the gambling centers was used by journalists to reinforce the charge that nurses were betting on patients' lives.

Another circumstance that might have helped precipitate the case was Jani Adams' personality. Ms. Adams was the supervisor on the night shift (which newspeople usually dub the "graveyard shift," a common enough nickname that took on a more sinister ring in this context), and she was variously described as "tense," "curt," "brusque," "high-strung," or "abrasive." Also, she admittedly indulged in the kind of gallows humor she believed common among people who work closely with death. When one of her patients died, for instance, she said, "Well, I killed another one." This grim flippancy bothered some of the other nurses, but no one who knew Ms. Adams took such remarks seriously, ascribing them only to her way of handling the pressure of the intensive care unit.

The very existence of the name "Death's Angel" added to the speculation. Ms. Adams denied charges that she called herself Death's Angel, but she did know the source of the name: it was the title of an episode of *Trapper John, M.D.*, a TV medical show. Whatever the context in which the name was mentioned in the ICU, it was too tempting a tag for writers to resist, and it appeared in virtually every article about the case, often in blazing headlines. The journalists could scarcely be blamed; the nickname was more dramatic and headlined the case more specifically than a neutral term such as "accused nurse" would have done.

The press had even more to write about when Ms. Adams hired the famous and flamboyant Melvin Belli as her attorney. If the journalists had sometimes indulged in emotionally charged language in reporting the charges against Jani Adams, Melvin Belli more than matched them in her defense. He called the case a "witch hunt," the indictment "a marshmallow indictment" based on hearsay comments by "some loose-lipped nurses who took things utterly out of context." First informed of the indictment, Belli reacted colorfully: "You've got to be kidding. Jesus Christ, you people don't have much to do down

there. . . I've never seen such a clear-cut case of innocence." He added a thinly veiled threat to the *Review-Journal*: "We won't be suing you people for a while now." (*Review-Journal*, April 2, 1980) Mr. Belli was given to referring to Ms. Adams as "this little girl" and calling the grand jury "nothing more than a firebrand to defame character." Reporters must have loved him; he was always good for an interesting quotation.

Sheer dramatic coincidence also gave journalists an interesting lead, since both the lawyer and client had previously done some acting. Belli had once played "the most evil spirit in the universe" on a *Star Trek* episode, so naturally the newspaper headline read: "Ex-'Evil Angel' Belli Defends Vegas Nurse." (North Las Vegas *Valley Times*, March 19, 1980) Another paper picked up on the fact that Jani Adams had once starred in a college play about mercy killing. The columnist didn't claim a direct connection, but the implication hung over the article until the continuation of the story on the inside pages finally mentioned that Ms. Adams' character had opposed mercy killing. (Hays, *Kansas News*, April 4, 1980)

All these factors—the location of the supposed crime, the vivid personalities of both defendant and lawyer, the combination of fact, coincidence, misunderstanding, and perhaps a personality conflict which caused the newly employed nurse to perceive a conspiracy, plus the sheer singularity of the story—combined to create a highly visible and memorable media event. Public reaction was no doubt further intensified by the natural sense of shock and outrage that occurs when a traditional source of good suddenly appears evil. Since nurses are entrusted with people's lives, the public has a need to believe not only that nurses are knowledgeable but also that they are benevolent. Hence, we feel more shocked and more personally threatened (and less forgiving) upon hearing of a nurse who commits a murder than of, say, a plumber who commits the same crime. The public's image of nurses was thoroughly assaulted by this story. The way the story was developed in

newspaper and television news makes an interesting and sometimes frightening study of the media's power to create and manipulate—whether consciously or unconsciously—the audience's perception of a situation and their image of the people involved in that situation.

Further Developments in the Case

All these factors heightened the public's emotional and psychological responses to the story, but no new facts appeared in the news until March 24, ten days after the story broke, when Jani Adams and others testified before the Grand Jury. At that time Melvin Belli revealed that police had threatened Ms. Adams with the gas chamber, adding that "She's been worked over by the police pretty good. She resents that."

Despite the fact that the police clearly believed Adams was guilty and didn't hesitate to tell her so, they had to admit that they could find no proof of any betting on patients' lives. (UPI, March 24, 1980) Belli said his client denied everything: "She denies she said anything, that she has done anything and denies pulling any plugs. She is mystified about these reports of mercy killings and says her reputation has been damaged."

Speaking for the dead man's wife was another attorney, Jack Pursel, who said that, "The widow was concerned about possible negligence and had questions about intravenous feeding procedures and the use of respiratory equipment." He also said the widow thought it was "a little weird" that she had been asked to sign the mortuary release form before her husband had died. Hospital officials said that the practice was routine procedure in terminal cases, but the coroner's office disagreed.

The next flurry of news came on or after April 2, when Jani Adams was indicted, charged with the death of Vincent Fraser. Although Belli scoffed at the "marshmallow indict-

ment" and predicted that the case would never come to trial, Ms. Adams was led off to jail in handcuffs. It was reported for the first time that Vincent Fraser had been hospitalized for months with kidney failure and that the cause of death was listed as infection, although early rumors said he had been in the hospital just for a simple hernia operation. His widow, now threatening to sue the hospital, was quoted as saying, "I had a feeling that something was wrong, that he wasn't receiving the right care. . . I just hope my husband's death will be avenged. I was beginning to accept his death as fate." (Washington, D.C. *Star*, April 3, 1980)

The District Attorney reiterated that Jani Adams' case had nothing to do with gambling. "Some witnesses told us they believed betting had taken place," he said, "but the only monetary amount mentioned was a nickel." No one accused Jani Adams of knowing about or participating in any gambling, but some newspapers just couldn't bear to drop this sensational aspect of the case, regardless of its irrelevancy. One particularly blatant example occurred in the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. On the day of the indictment, this paper's front page blazed with an inch-high headline: "The Ghoul Betting Murder Case." The story under this eye-catching banner began by saying that Jani Adams was "accused in connection with a bizarre death-betting scandal," adding that these charges had "rocked this jaded gambling center." The article did not mention until its continuation on the inside pages that even the nickel betting was not, in fact, involved in the Adams case. Ironically enough, this same article reported that Belli blamed the news media for pushing an indictment based on "gross hearsay," and it also included admissions by Las Vegas newsmen that journalists had "tended to go overboard" on the story.

Belli added a little emotionalism of his own, saying,

The grand jury is nothing more than a firebrand to defame character, which they've done on this little girl who is a very

conscientious, able, religious, staunch Catholic nurse. She's the last person in the world who would pull the plug on anybody to let them die, because even if she thought of it, her religion, her doctrine wouldn't let her do it.

While this might well have been true, an alert prosecutor could have pointed out that Ms. Adams' devout Catholicism had not prevented her from getting two divorces or from living with a man out of wedlock, actions also not sanctioned by the Church. Neither argument, of course, would have proven anything about Fraser's death, but Belli seemed to feel the need to fight fire with fire, to match innuendo with innuendo.

For the next week and a half, newspeople supplemented the announcement of the indictment with background information about Jani Adams. She was, it turned out, a highly educated woman, having two master's degrees besides her R.N. diploma. She had a B.A. and an M.A. in English and taught English for a year at Clemson University. She had another M.A. in speech and dramatics and had starred in a number of plays, including the prize-winning "Aftermath," a play about mercy-killing. Former university associates remembered her variously as "a superb actress," "bright," "dynamic," "one of those people who wander from one place to the next but never settle down," "a lover of animals," "an optimistic student [who] always seemed happy," and "a very attractive girl." (Hays, *Kansas News*, April 4, 1980). For the first time, favorable adjectives about Ms. Adams appeared in some news stories. One reporter, for instance, referred to her as "the pretty, black-haired, diminutive nurse." (*Las Vegas Sun*, April 5, 1980)

On April 6, Ms. Adams broke her silence and gave an interview to Associated Press in which she talked about the nature of her job and her feelings about it. She said that intensive care nurses are "pretty special people" and that the public "has no conception" of the pressures on them.

What we see and the stress we live through every day only another nurse or doctor could possibly understand. You want to do so much and sometimes you can't. You want a miracle. You see death every day and you say it's not going to hurt me. But it does. (*Washington Star*, April 6, 1980)

Still, she said, "It's not all horror. I wouldn't give it up for anything else." While admitting that the conversation in the intensive care unit might sound like a scene from *M*A*S*H*, Ms. Adams denied charges that she had turned off Fraser's respiratory machine, saying that "only God can take life. It's not your decision." "When you've spent as much time as I have saving lives, you bet I'm bitter," she said of her indictment. In this interview, Ms. Adams also explained the envelope of money, allegedly stuffed with bets, which so aroused Nurse Farro's suspicions. In fact, the envelope had held only a small amount of money, collected months before Fraser's death, to give a farewell buffet to a departing nurse—scarcely an amount to incite one to murder.

The Associated Press article softened somewhat the harsh image of Jani Adams that had so far emerged in the news. By showing her pride in her work, by offering a logical explanation for the morbid humor that had earned her (justly or not) the nickname "Death's Angel," by revealing more of her family and educational background, the interview gave the public some more favorable information to balance against the ugly accusations. The daughter of a Douglas Aircraft vice-president, Ms. Adams had been an honor student and been "very happy" though something of "a shy little mouse." She had loved drama, acting in Shakespearean plays, designing costumes; but she left her drama studies and her teaching to become a nurse because, she said, "I love working with people; I love helping people in a direct way."

Other papers added information not found in the Associated Press Report. Ms. Adams and her boyfriend granted an interview at home to a reporter from the *Las Vegas Sun*, which

more than any other paper had endeavored to be fair in the midst of hysterical rumors. Ms. Adams said she had known nothing of the alleged killings until she read about them in the newspapers; the same day she was suspended from her job and told to go to the police station. There, she said, she was treated unfairly:

It was brutal, and they were not just brutal to us; they were brutal to all of our friends. We were convicted before we walked into their office. One of them threatened me with the gas chamber and said he'd be glad to see me go.

Another detective introduced her with the words, "This is Death's Angel, the murderess." Bernard Deters, her boyfriend, corroborated this account, adding that the police had told both of them, "'You can be a witness or you can be a defendant'. . . Every witness in this case they instilled [with] the fear that you could be convicted of murder if you didn't give the kind of answers these guys wanted to hear." (Las Vegas Sun, April 6, 1980)

Another softening touch to Ms. Adams' image came with reports that she raised prize silver cats; and the *Daily News* (New York, April 6, 1980) included a wistful quotation from Adams about how much the investigation had frightened her and how "having my favorite silver on my lap helps a lot."

It is hard to know how much of this information the public absorbed or believed, but the North Las Vegas *Valley Times* said that Ms. Adams "certainly has our sympathy for what she currently is enduring, and, we suspect, the sympathy of thousands of other Las Vegas." The author of this editorial admitted that s/he didn't know whether Adams was guilty or innocent but reminded readers that an indictment "is only an accusation, and usually based on a very one-sided presentation." Most of the editorial examined media coverage of the story, admitting that the *Valley Times* itself could not be exempted from charges of having overplayed the story at first, and explaining that newspeople had no precedent to guide

their coverage of such a story. In retrospect the author realized that coverage could have been better and was now trying to rectify the media's poor judgment. "At very least," said the editorial, Jani Adams "deserves not to be condemned and convicted in the public mind until she has had her day in court . . . it is incumbent upon both the media and the community to keep [the case] in perspective." (April 11, 1980) It is a shame that such fairmindedness did not also get stressed in the nationwide news dispatches.

Grand Jury Transcripts

The public had need to remember the warning to weigh all the evidence a few days later when the grand jury transcripts were made public, revealing a bewildering set of charges and denials or explanations. Unfortunately, out of a 306-page transcript, journalists chose to quote only those testimonies most damning to Jani Adams, rarely if ever including the other side of the argument. Once again, the public's image of this nurse was completely negative. The testimonies were definitely disturbing, as exemplified by these excerpts from the Las Vegas *Review-Journal's* account (April 14, 1980):

The nurse also told the grand jury that Adams had asked on March 3 if Fraser, a 52-year-old patient suffering from a liver ailment, was still alive.

"(Adams) asked me 'Isn't he gone yet?', you know, because she didn't want to do the tube change." The tubes carried oxygen to Fraser.

"I said to her, 'Well, you know he's going to hang on for a while because of that ventilator (life support system)'," the witness testified.

"Adams said, 'Well, I'll take care of that', " he said.

The nurse said Adams then turned a control knob on the ventilator all the way to the left. About 45 minutes later Fraser's heartbeat started slowing.

The nurse said Adams was playing cards with some other hospital personnel and a nurse informed her of the slowing heartbeat.

The witness told the grand jury Adams replied, "We know, don't worry about it," and went on with her card game.

Testimony claimed that when Fraser's heart monitor showed just a straight line, Adams ordered the nurse to go into the patient's room and fake a heart massage, according to the transcript.

"She said 'Go thump on his chest,' with her finger like that," the witness testified.

Fraser died shortly afterward.

No one pointed out that Adams' question "Isn't he gone yet?" did not necessarily have to have the threatening meaning that the witness assumed it had. It might have been mere surprise. The reporter noted (without quoting her) that Adams denied touching Fraser's support system or any wrongdoing that would cause his death, and then he proceeded to quote the next witness' testimony that Adams had once stood beside a terminal patient saying, "Come on, Marian, die." The nurse testifying said she took the remark only as an instance of Adams' sick sense of humor. Adams denied making the remark at all. She also denied ever having called herself the Angel of Death although two people (a nurse and a police detective) testified that she had.

Other negative testimony came from Fraser's widow who testified that:

Her husband was unable to talk during his last days but was still trying to get some message across to her about the machine.

"He just kept pointing to that machine and shaking his head," Bertha Fraser said.

"Actually tears were starting to come to his eyes and he'd shake. He was nervous about something."

She said a nurse—she didn't know which one—asked her to sign a standard release form for the mortuary even though her husband was still alive.

Associated Press dispatches sent out accounts of the same incidents nationwide, again without any indication of Jani Adams' side of the story. No one, for instance, noticed that Mr. Fraser's pointing to the machine and shaking his head might have meant something less sinister than apprehension about being murdered. He might just have been afraid of dying; he might have been expressing reluctance to have his misery prolonged by machines. For weeks, no one printed the explanation of Ms. Fraser's being asked to sign the mortuary form before Mr. Fraser died, nor explained why Jani Adams replied, "We know; don't worry about it," when told of Fraser's failing heart beat. Only the damning bits of testimony were made public. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* added a few more, saying that one nurse testified that Adams had told "someone to falsify a report to show Fraser was given medication when the heartbeat slowed." (April 17, 1980) Yet another nurse testified that Adams had said of Fraser, "I want him gone by 3:30," and the nurse said it gave her a "queasy feeling." From the selection of testimony printed in the news, the public could only conclude that Jani Adams was a completely cold-blooded murderer.

The Other Side of the Case

Only one man, in one newspaper, seemed concerned about all the evidence on the other side of the case. Paul Price, author of a regular *Las Vegas Sun* column called "Dateline Las Vegas," devoted at least four of his almost page-long columns to presenting a more realistic view of the case. Jani Adams, he said, has been "indicted for the murder of a 'dead man.'" To offset the widow's alleged assertion that Fraser had been in perfect health except for a hernia, Paul Price quoted directly from Fraser's medical records to show that in fact Fraser had been in a steady decline since his first entry into Sunrise Hospital on January 8, two months before his death.

Fraser was bleeding from a 20-year-old peptic ulcer; he had cirrhosis of the liver "so severe it required two previous surgical procedures"; he had radical surgery with a "stormy" postoperative period; he developed low blood pressure, sepsis, and heart trouble; he had to have a tracheotomy; he went into shock; his kidneys failed; his surgical wound became grossly infected, and fecal matter was draining from the abdomen. "Weeks before his death, five physicians noted in the charts that his condition was 'terminal.'" By February 18, Fraser had gone into septic shock from the infection in his abdomen. His physician wrote, "prognosis terrible, but surgery indicated to drain the sepsis." February 19 the doctor wrote amazedly, "Survived the operation!!" February 20: "Things are worsening." On February 28, Ms. Fraser was told that her husband's death was imminent, and she went out "that same day, on her own [and] made arrangements with a Florida funeral home." (Las Vegas Sun) Hence, she scarcely could have been amazed at her husband's death three days later.

Nationwide, newspeople had reported that the widow had thought it "weird" to be asked to sign the mortuary release form before her husband actually died, but Paul Price was apparently the only one to print the quite logical explanation for this procedure. He quoted one of the hospital physicians:

At about 11 p.m., hours before Vincent Fraser died, Mrs. Fraser told the medical staff, 'I simply can't take it any more. I am going to leave.' This is a woman who does not have a phone and whenever we had to contact her we would have to send a police car to pick her up and take her to a phone. We explained the options to her — she could wait until her husband died, she could come back later, or she could sign the mortuary release form before leaving. She chose to sign the form. A few hours after she left, at 4:30 a.m., Vincent Fraser died of septic shock.

When revealed in full, the testimony that Jani Adams had turned off Fraser's respiratory machine — the circumstance on which the whole murder charge rested — also proved less con-

vincing than original reports would have made the public believe. The witness, a male nurse who had not yet passed his state board exam, was asked if he could tell what Ms. Adams was adjusting on the respiratory machine:

A: There was — there's like four controls down there from — if I can recall, and it was in the left lower area. I double-checked it later the next day. . . because I was in question about it because I'm not trained in the ventilator area other than to dump the water and suction a patient. So I rechecked it and it was like positive to me it was the O₂ settings.

Q: Could you tell me if she was turning it up or down?

A: She turned it completely left. Um, I can recall that.

Q: Would that increase or decrease the flow of oxygen?

A: I talked to a couple of respiratory therapists, and they said that decreases —

Q: Without telling us, do you know if that would increase or decrease?

A: Positively knowing, I would say no.

Even if testimony had proved "beyond all reasonable doubt" that Ms. Adams had actually turned the oxygen knob, there was no proof that such an action had caused or hastened Fraser's death. The doctor who signed the death certificate said, "I know of no clinical evidence that supports an allegation that this patient died of anything but natural causes." Records showed that everything possible had been done for Mr. Fraser, that his failing heart rate was expected in view of his terminal condition. Such information sheds a different light on Adams' remark, "We know; don't worry about it," when nurse Farro reported Fraser's failing condition.

Hearing all the testimony, Judge Michael Wendell dismissed the indictment, ruling that "the cause of Mr. Fraser's death by the criminal agency of another and not from natural causes was not established to a reasonable degree of medical probability," and there was insufficient evidence to hold Jani Adams for trial. (Associated Press, May 31, 1980) The

hospital issued a public statement sympathizing with Ms. Adams' long ordeal and welcoming her back to her job. When the case was all over, Ms. Fraser told reporters:

Deep in my heart, no, I don't think that my husband was killed. The nurses I met at Sunrise were absolutely wonderful to me. I never met Jani Adams at all. All this talk in the paper about my saying that all Vince had was a hernia is nonsense. I knew he was a very sick man. I knew he was probably going to die. But, you know, you hope for the best, that, maybe, if he makes it through the night, why with all those antibiotics in him, who knows, he might be about to turn the corner. But I was told how sick he was. We were really only talking about his living an extra day or so... Vince is dead. Let him rest in peace. (Chicago *Tribune*, June 21, 1980)

A few papers did a summary article about the case, mentioning the difficulties that Jani Adams faced in living down the whole scandal, and then the news reports died away completely.

The Aftermath—Aspects of Impact

There were those who did not want to forget the lesson inherent in the Adams case. The hospital said, "Scurrilous, unfounded, unverified, and unconfirmed allegations were made against [Adams] in an atmosphere of sensationalism and hysteria." (*Sun*, May 31, 1980) Adams' other attorney, Gary Logan, said, "The way these proceedings are conducted, the Pope could be indicted." (Chicago *Tribune*, June 21, 1980) Hospital pathologist Daniel Wilkes said, "What we have here is a case of media malpractice.... If the newspaper hadn't rushed into print, there would have been no need for a flimsy indictment to protect the paper and the DA's office; and we would have been spared the enormous damage to Jani, the nursing staff, the hospital, and the community. What [the *Review-Journal* editor] did to this community should never

be allowed to be forgotten." That news reports had damaged the reputations of the hospital and its nurses was indisputable. One intensive care unit nurse at Sunrise commented, "My sister called from Tulsa, saying all the people there believed what they read in the papers."

That is the real point, of course: people do believe what they read, see, or hear in the news. And although most news reporters conscientiously reported what they knew about the case, their precipitate leaking of the story, their use of emotionally loaded terms like "Death's Angel," their choice of details to include or exclude, their use of pictures, and their eye-catching headlines all virtually dictated that the public would perceive Jani Adams as guilty. It has been proven that when people are asked to recall something they've read or heard, they retain most strongly the first and the last things said, with the weakest recall on the middle parts. Because the *Review-Journal* hastened into print with news of the secret investigation at Sunrise Hospital before facts were even known, all it had to report were the rumors, the speculations, the reactions of horror to the rumors; and these spread nationwide as UPI and AP picked up the story. Hence, the public's strongest impression, the part of the story they would recall most clearly, was of nurses at an inconceivable low—murdering patients to cheat on the betting.

The sheer repetition of the stories increased their impact. Almost every article about the case summarized Jani Adams' alleged crimes before adding any new details. Furthermore, there were four times as many newspaper stories about the charges and the investigation as there were about the resolution of the case—the dismissal of these charges. On television news, the ratio was even more damning—seven times as many news items about the accusations as there were about the dismissal. Millions of TV viewers heard, and no doubt believed, the accusations that nurses had participated in these callous actions; and millions heard Walter Cronkite's reference to the

"ghoul pool" betting. But the story of the dismissal of the case never appeared on network TV news at all.

Walter Cronkite's report is an example of another factor that made the Jani Adams case so noticeable to the public—the language newspeople used to report the case. "Ghoul pool," no doubt, was used just for the catchiness of the sound, but many reporters repeated it. "Death's Angel" may or may not have been Jani Adams' own rubric for herself; she denied it, but two people testified under oath that she had called herself by that name. Still, once the name became public, who could forget it, and what reporter would pass up the opportunity to catch the public eye so easily? The nickname set off all kinds of mental reverberations. For some, it was only a grim perversion of nurses' common nickname as "Angels in White." For those who remembered World War II, "Death's Angel" carried more horrible connotations of the notoriously vicious killer of Nazi concentration camp fame.

These were the flashier examples of reporters' language, but newspeople could shape the public's perception of Jani Adams' guilt or innocence in subtler terms as well. When Ms. Adams went to the police station after learning of the accusations against her, for example, some newspeople said that she "appeared voluntarily" while others said she "surrendered herself." The one term connotes an innocent person offering her help; the other connotes a guilty person who has given up hope of escaping from the arm of the law. Whether they did it consciously or not, reporters were telling the public what to believe.

Pictures often made the same kind of subtle judgments, however careful a reporter might have been to report only the "facts" in the article itself. If stories of the accusations carried a picture at all, it was usually a picture of Ms. Adams with her face contorted in some unpleasant emotion; whether horror, grief, guilt, remorse, or belligerence, the viewers could decide for themselves, depending on what they believed about

Adams' guilt or innocence. When it became evident that many of the accusations had been hasty or inaccurate, pleasanter pictures began to accompany the articles—pictures of Ms. Adams with her face in repose, or smiling at her cats, pictures of her at home with her boyfriend. The pictures made their own statements about Ms. Adams, although even here reporters sometimes "told" viewers what to see. One caption, for example, described Ms. Adams as "flashing a victory smile"; but when the same picture was shown to a number of people without the caption and without the article, they described the emotion on her face variously as "confused," "remorseful," or "indeterminate." However, told that the expression was a victory smile, many people would no doubt perceive it as just that.

Although the initial impressions about what happened at Sunrise Hospital were corrected somewhat in news stories, the evidence clearly suggests that the public got and kept a very bad image of nurse Jani Adams. The vast preponderance of articles on the story concerned the accusations. Screaming headlines (bright blue ones in some of the Vegas papers) and front-page coverage got the public's attention strongly and quickly. Not only are these first impressions the strongest ones, but many people quit following a story after the first few articles and therefore gain no added information to change the initial impression. Furthermore, although national news services picked up the story that the case had been dismissed, only the local Las Vegas papers gave any details about the evidence that had led to that dismissal. Hence, audiences who knew only the testimony against Jani Adams must have been further horrified to hear that such a person had been "let loose."

Quite aside from the unfavorable image that news coverage might have created or fostered by reporting rumor, misinformation, and misunderstanding, there is still left another unfavorable image resulting from questions that remain unanswered. Perhaps no one will ever know exactly what happened

in the hospital. At very least, Jani Adams is guilty of extraordinarily poor taste in jokes. But joking about killing patients is not tantamount to actually killing them and since the supposed victim showed no sign of having been murdered, there was clearly no legal case against the nurse. There never should have been an indictment. But the public is still left with the image of a nurse who talked about patient care in such a way that made even her friends and seasoned colleagues in the ICU terribly uncomfortable. There are questions, too, surrounding the eyewitness testimony that Ms. Adams turned off Fraser's respirator. The testimony was rightfully dismissed, from a legal standpoint, since the witness was unqualified and since there was no evidence the alleged action had caused Fraser's death anyway. But one still wonders: what *did* the witness see Ms. Adams doing? And could a person who talked so callously about patients actually have been capable of turning down their oxygen?

There were those who said that no one fought harder for a patient's life than Jani Adams; others said Adams was the one nurse they would most want to take care of them if they were in intensive care; many described her as competent and conscientious. It may even be that inwardly she was *more* sensitive to patients' sufferings and therefore needed an even stronger defense mechanism such as morbid humor to enable her to bear the pressures of her job. But "image," by definition, is the view that shows on the outside, and Ms. Adams herself certainly contributed to the poor image that the public got of her as a nurse, though she didn't deserve the media sensationalism which overwhelmingly focused on the worst possible image of her real and alleged behavior.

One can, of course, make only informed guesses about how most people responded to the news media's treatment of Jani Adams's case, and it seems safe to guess that the majority thought ill of her. However, many people made their feelings public by writing letters to newspapers, and their responses

suggest some interesting and rather complex factors concerning the impact of the news reports. At first, not surprisingly, the letters were completely negative: the writers were outraged at the awful news; almost universally they believed that the rumored stories were true; and they frequently related the Adams case to other inhumane horrors in history.

This typical reader, for instance, found the case "very shocking" in its implications:

An angel is associated with doing good. Is a 'death's angel' one who gives a person a good death? Does the 'death's angel' decide when it is the best time for a person to die? The power of life and death should not be left in the hands of self-appointed angels. . . . These events remind me strongly of Frederic Werthan's book "A Sign for Cain." This book tells how in the 1930s German doctors decreed deaths for 275,000 sick Germans. They first started with the terminally ill patients. Later they 'euthanized' amputees, crippled, handicapped and epileptic Germans. . . . It was part of an effort to eliminate those who were unwanted by the German society. We should wonder how close our society is now to dealing similarly with our 'unwanted' members. (Davis, California *Enterprise*, March 18, 1980)

This letter was written in response to the initial reports about the Death's Angel case, when few facts were available. And yet the rumors obviously made a powerfully emotional impact on that reader and were evidently accepted as fact.

Even newspaper writers were not immune to the media impact, and sometimes they displayed purely visceral responses. Only a few days later, one paper ran an emotional, four-part editorial, a kind of panel discussion reaction to the Las Vegas story; and, again, all four writers clearly assumed that the charges against the Sunrise nurses were true. One, for instance, wrote:

It is staggering enough to read that some staff members made bets on the time the victim would die, but that this revolting

situation went on for three years without being detected is incredible. People who are so callous toward the sufferings of others have no business working at jobs where compassionate and sympathetic personalities are important. Some type of screening process should be instituted. (Hayward, California Review, March 24, 1980)

Another commented that peer influence has much to do with the development of moral values, and she compared the nursing scandal to the My Lai massacre:

By the time we become adults, we should have a value system built in. But certainly there is still peer pressure. Look what happened at My Lai. No one stood back to question what was happening. Everyone was 'just taking orders.' Childhood is left behind, but the game goes on. It becomes deadly and callous when peer pressure takes over and the value system isn't used . . . Nurses trained to preserve life, begin making bets on when patients will die and then better the odds by turning off life support systems. It's all a game, except to the victims. (Hayward, California Review, March 24, 1980)

Although such negative responses were the most common, not all of the letters and editorials automatically damned the Las Vegas nurses. Interestingly enough, when the accusations against Jani Adams got the most hysterical, there was a backlash of sympathy—some for her, but much more for all the other nurses who had been tainted by implication. People began to put in a word for the faithful nurses (even as they hinted that the charges might have been true about some of the others).

The Las Vegas *Sun* carried a front-page signed article in praise of nurses. Written by a veteran, an amputee with extensive hospital experience, the article was in part a nostalgic remembrance of all the good nurses who had helped him readjust to life after his injuries. "Doctors make it possible for a patient to live. Nurses make you want to live," he began as he recounted specific instances of nurses who had made him com-

fortable, who had taken him hunting or to a rodeo, who had been particularly gentle while dressing his wounds. Because of these experiences he was ready to keep an open mind about the dreadful allegations daily aired in the papers:

Today, the nurses at Sunrise Hospital feel alone and alienated because of problems, true or untrue, revealed by law enforcement and the media. Even if the problems are real and proven against some staff members, there is no cause for all these ladies of mercy to suffer pangs of conscience. . . . Nurses have helped me carry a heavy load several times during my life. Now I want to join the thousands of Las Vegas who are willing to help them carry an unfair burden hoisted on their shoulders in recent days. It's really the least I can do for some of the fine human beings God placed on earth to help me get over the rough times in life with the least possible discomfort. (Mike O' Callaghan, *Sun*, March 21, 1980)

Some 300 nurses from Sunrise Hospital wrote and signed an impassioned letter themselves and sent copies to various newspapers. The letter said, in part:

I am a nurse at Sunrise Hospital.
I am the nurse who shared your apprehensions when you delivered your baby. . . .
I am the nurse who alleviated your children's fears. . . .
I am the nurse whose adrenalin was overflowing and my pulse pounded when your condition worsened. You needed my knowledge and expertise immediately.
I was ready to help you because of years of preparation and continuing education on my own time and expense. . . .
I am the nurse who worked additional, exhausting hours at the expense of my family because your condition had worsened and you needed me.
I am the nurse who tried to comfort you in your sorrow. . . . standing there with tears running down my cheeks. And today, I am among the hundreds of nurses. . . . some of you have openly condemned—personally and professionally. The word "insensitivity" does not rest with me, but rather with those who have

thrived on the irresponsible sensationalism in the news media which has condemned all of us in the nursing profession. I was there when you needed me. Where are you going to be now that I need you? (*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 23, 1980 and *Las Vegas Sun*, March 21, 1980)

At very least, these sympathetic letters and editorials gave the public something else to think about, something favorable to balance against the sheer awfulness of the reported scandal at Sunrise Hospital. But they may have had an even more important effect: they may actually have influenced the nature of the subsequent reporting of the case. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove a causal relationship, but it is a fact that the accounts of the Adams case became less sensational, less rumor-mongering, after the public began to express their pleas for fairness and sympathy on behalf of all the good nurses. The newspapers, especially the papers in Las Vegas, where most of the sympathetic letters appeared, began to examine their coverage, and they admitted their failings, humbled somewhat at the damage that their reporting had done to the people and the institution involved in the case. On a national level, where relatively few people wrote letters to the editors about the Adams case, little such reflection occurred.

Such facts suggest that the impact between media and public is, or can be, a two-way influence. The news media report events (whether real or rumored) that will make an impact on their audience; the public responds, causing the media reporters to modify their accounts; both in printing public response and in changing their own accounts, the media make a fresh impact on the public, who may respond again. Theoretically, the process can continue indefinitely. But if people make no response to the media coverage, then newspeople are denied one valuable source of feedback with which to modify possible excesses or biases in their accounts. To be sure, many other factors influence the nature of media reporting, but the influ-

ence of the public's response has perhaps been underrated.

Las Vegas, of course, was the city most affected, most personally concerned, with the happenings at Sunrise Hospital. Still, was it only coincidence that Vegas papers—which got (or printed) the highest percentage of letters of sympathy and understanding for nurses—were virtually the only papers to present the evidence in Jani Adams' favor, to explain why the indictment was dismissed, or to express publicly that their initial coverage had been inaccurate, hasty, and inflammatory? It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if nurses all over the country had written letters like the one the Sunrise nurses sent to the Las Vegas papers. Would the national coverage have improved? Would there have been a little less damage to the image of nursing everywhere?

Certainly the damage caused by the coverage of Jani Adams' case can scarcely be understated, however many expressions of sympathy later appeared. The press' precipitate breaking of the story and their sensationalism in reporting created consequences with serious implications both for legal procedures and for the image of nursing. *People* magazine (June 23, 1980) quoted Las Vegas' assistant district attorney as admitting "somewhat lamely" that "we knew we had serious problems with the indictment" and wishing that he had "sought expert medical opinion before proceeding." Dr. Daniel Wilkes, a hospital pathologist and trustee, agreed heartily, declaring:

If police, press, and prosecutors make decisions like this, what almost happened in Las Vegas could close down every intensive care unit in the country. Every day there would be indictments for murder.

The image of murderer—and a very cold-blooded murderer—is the image of Jani Adams that most of the country was given, and the image that they almost certainly retained, because of the nature of the reporting and the odd combina-

tion of circumstances in the case. Such a negative image was no doubt also reinforced by the increasing news reports of nurses elsewhere being accused of murdering their patients. Before the Jani Adams scandal had cooled down, several other cases were making nation-wide headlines. In Illinois, a nurse was accused of murdering two elderly patients with overdoses of insulin. She denied the charges. In Massachusetts, three nurses were indicted for giving massive overdoses of morphine sulfate to a woman they believed (wrongly, as it turned out) to be in a terminal condition. They admitted giving the morphine but said they were following standard hospital treatment procedures for terminal patients. Only two years before the Jani Adams case, news media all over the world had reported the long-running and much-disputed case of two Filipino nurses accused of murdering patients in the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Veterans Administration Hospital. Such stories of nurse-murderers are on the increase, and they are certainly among the most visible media stories about nurses today. The consequence to the image of nurses is obviously negative in the extreme; and when news reports of these murder accusations are inflamed with rumor and sensationalism, the image is worse still.

Postscript

The damaging consequences of Jani Adams' case did not end when the story finally died down in news media reports. Some months later, the North Las Vegas *Valley Times* reported that Jani Adams was quitting her job at Sunrise Hospital because working conditions had become "unbearable." After the murder indictment had been dismissed, Ms. Adams said, she had been made to work extra hours and with a heavier work load than other nurses; the nursing director denied her request for a transfer from the intensive care unit to the emergency ward because of her "attitude." She felt that

the administrators were "out to get" her, but she wouldn't attribute that to the Death's Angel controversy. However, the paper reported:

She said fellow workers are having trouble erasing the memories of her experience in the case. She said she still overhears snide remarks made against her. "The whole affair has left me bitter," she said. (Sept. 26, 1980)

Unspoken, but implied, was the suggestion that the other nurses were also bitter because of the damage they felt had also been done to them by the case.

The final irony of the Jani Adams case is that it may end as it began—as a media event. Agent Jaki Baskow reportedly was trying to negotiate a contract for a possible television movie about Ms. Adams' story. "I'd like to tell the people the true facts of what happened," said the agent. "It could happen to anyone—she was a true victim of the press." Ms. Adams was in favor of the project, despite the added publicity:

I don't see this as exploiting the incident at all, but finally getting some truth out. . . . I sure would like to see the truth come out. I understand there are places in the country that don't even know I was acquitted. (Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*, July 30, 1980)

Certainly, network television had done nothing to let the country know of her acquittal although they had done much to inform the public of the accusations against her. The negative image of nursing thus created can never be recalled or erased from the public's memory. But perhaps a televised movie about the case could offer a fairer image to superimpose over the old one.

In sum, the anatomy of the biggest news story about nursing in 1980 points to the vulnerability of nurses to charges of euthanasia. It also underlines the importance of an expanded effort to portray the positive side of nursing in the news media to offset the inevitable media hype over stories such as the "Angel of Death."