

GERONTOLOGICAL NURSING GETS EXPERT HELP ON USING THE NEWS

Gaining public support for gerontological nursing policies requires educating consumers about contributions made and the benefits derived. To do this nurses can use mass media.

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The news media continually presents messages to the public about the supposed reality of gerontological nursing. The public uses these messages to construct personal images of gerontological nurses and nursing¹.

Public information about gerontological nursing services for the elderly is currently in a confused and disjointed state. Dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of some gerontological nursing care is so pervasive that basic changes required are commonly acknowledged.

Choices available to gerontological nurses, patients and their families, administrators, and others directly involved depend on the accuracy of public information and the subsequent decisions made by the federal and state governments.^{2,3}

Information about variables associated with the quantity and quality of gerontological nursing services are at the very heart of several policy issues. These are: the worth of gerontological nursing care that may prolong life at various levels of existence, the value of subsidizing the maintenance of the elderly in a supportive nursing care environment, and the value of encouraging maximal independence for patients at the risk of economic consequences.⁴

The most effective mechanism for disseminating information about gerontological nursing to health care con-

sumers is the news media. The nation's press serves to form public opinion to a large extent.^{5,6,7}

Newspapers are tremendously powerful as sensitizing instruments. This force is increasing as the news media is used more often as an aid for coping with an increasingly complicated society. Consequently, the ways in which newspapers represent or misrepresent gerontological nurses will continue to have a large influence on the profession by affecting public opinion.

This study analyzes the informational quality of gerontological nursing news in the nation's press over a four year period. It is part of a comprehensive study of all nursing news. Ninety-six articles on gerontological nursing are compared with 4,787 articles on other clinical nursing specialties.

Collecting the data involved employing a clipping service to identify and cut out newspaper articles with the word "nurse" or "nursing" in every newspaper published in the United States. These articles are classified according to newspaper name, location, circulation, date of publication, page placement, and are coded by trained coders using the *News Analysis Tool* developed and validated for the project.

Specific questions addressed in this study are:

1. What is the degree of audience exposure to gerontological nurses and their services through the press?

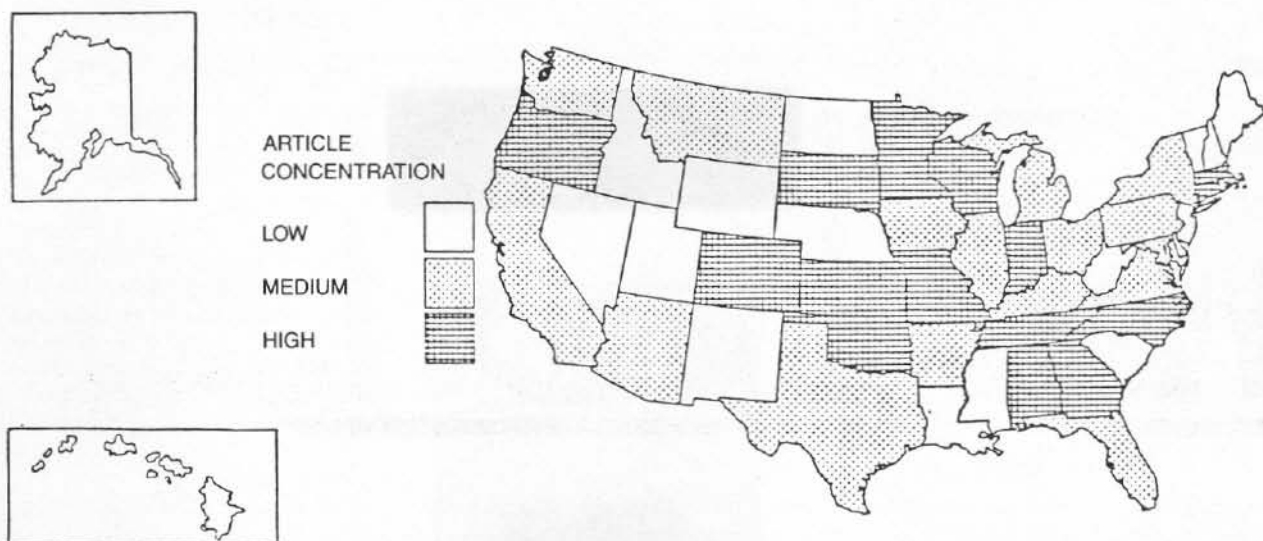
2. What characteristics are being conveyed to the public about gerontological nurses, their practice, and their professional relationships?
3. What is the quality of the image of gerontological nursing presented in newspapers?
4. What differences exist in newspaper coverage of gerontological nursing as opposed to other clinical nursing specialties?
5. What changes have occurred in the presentation of gerontological nursing over time?

Dissemination of Gerontological Nursing News

In terms of geographical distribution, the number of newspaper articles on gerontological nursing in each state is contained in Figure 1. The greatest number are published in the Midwest and South, and the lowest numbers in the upper New England and Rocky Mountain States. Significantly, the states highest in the number of elderly residents—Florida, Arkansas, Rhode Island, and Iowa—are not the states with the largest number of articles on gerontological nursing.

Gerontological nursing articles are published in newspapers with larger circulations,* indicating a wider audience exposure, but are very similar to news reports about the other clinical spe-

FIGURE 1
GERONTOLOGICAL NURSING ARTICLES PER CAPITA



cialities in story type hard news versus feature stories. The fact that 84% of all gerontological nursing articles fall into the category of hard news means that many potential news reports are being lost. Gerontological nurses must generate feature story ideas such as innovative services, educational programs, and research findings. It is unlikely that the press, left to its own devices, will do so.

Nurses in general and gerontological nurses in particular write few letters to the editor. Only 5.2% of the gerontological nursing articles are of this type. Letters to the editor are effective means for conveying a message to the public, and should be employed by nurses. For example, deep concern was expressed in one letter over a portrayal of gerontological nurses as uneducated and uncommitted to the profession:

The negative image of some nursing homes could easily convey the image that nurses who work in nursing homes are less than professional. However, high-quality care does not happen by chance. It is the result of deliberative decision-making and action. That is what the professional nurse is doing—not just “playing a custodial role.”

Another example of a positive letter to the editor was published in the July 1980 *Miami Herald*. In this letter a geriatric nurse practitioner wrote in response to an article on the use of drugs in nursing homes:

The problem of drug therapy in the elderly is a very serious one . . . The responsibility lies in several areas; from the physician who orders the drug to the patient who takes it . . . One of the key factors in the care of the elderly involves assertiveness. Nurses, families, and the elderly themselves must be assertive with their physicians and state, local, and federal bureaucrats who control the health-care delivery system in the United States.⁹

Demographic Characteristics

In terms of gender, nurses in the press are usually depicted as female, and gerontological nurses are even more often portrayed as female. Also, when gerontological nursing education is mentioned in newspaper articles, it is shown to be a relatively high education compared to nurses in the other specialties. The articles reported 29% of these nurses as having earned a bac-

calaureate or higher degree. This included a small number of PhDs and a larger number of master's degrees.

Story Content

The gerontological nursing articles cover several subjects shown in Figure 2. The largest proportion of articles focus on the gerontological nurse practitioner and other advanced specialists (24%). These articles typically depict nurses with advanced preparation for their role and describe their various responsibilities.

A typical positive story in this category, published in a Texas newspaper, depicted a nurse practitioner who set up a health care center for the elderly in a church. She is shown in the role of managing common health problems, conducting screenings, and providing psychosocial care.¹⁰

Generally, articles in this category highlight the preventive aspects of the care provided by gerontological nurse practitioners and specialists who “. . . are in a prime position to help keep people healthy . . . whereas physicians are primarily for treating illness once it has already set in.”¹¹

These articles often emphasize the changing relationships between nurses

and physicians, and the differing expectations of consumers of gerontological nursing services. For example, the *Washington Post* carried an article in 1980 entitled "Geriatrics now a beacon for nurse practitioners" which noted that:

They don't make nurses like they used to. Gone are the days when they played 76th trombone to the physician's first. They don't make elderly people like they used to, either. In many areas of the District, they have stopped calling their doctors whenever they have a slight pain. Instead, they let a student from George Washington University's Adult/Geriatric Nurse Practitioner Program handle the problem.¹²

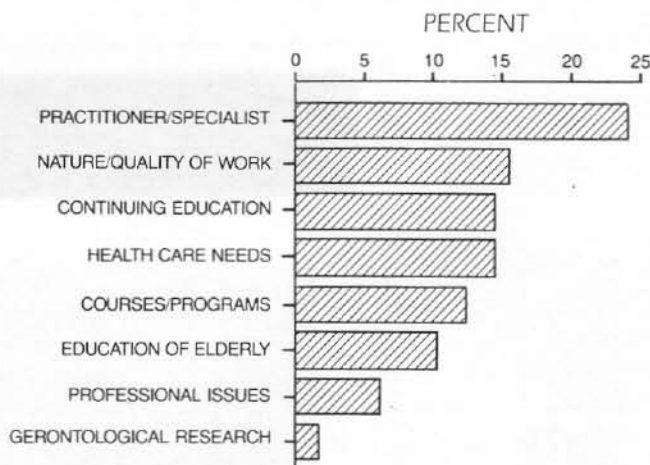
The second most frequently reported subject in the articles, accounts for 15.5% of the sample. It focuses on the quality and nature of the work of the gerontological nurse. Many of the articles contain interviews with gerontological nurses who find their work both challenging and rewarding. Most of the nurses say they enjoy working with the elderly and prefer gerontological nursing to other nursing specialties. Most newspaper articles in this category mention that gerontological nursing allows the development of close relationships with patients. Such relationships are not as likely to occur in other nursing specialties.

These articles often contain positive descriptions of gerontological nurses, including "dedicated," "patient," "understanding," "caring," and "loving." Countering these favorable messages is the finding that gerontological nurses are more likely to leave the profession than nurses in other specialties*, and role confusion is more prevalent in the gerontological specialty*.

The third category of articles contains announcements or descriptions of continuing education programs being offered on various aspects of gerontological nursing at the practice and administrative levels (14.6%). The contents of these programs and workshops include stress adaptation for nurses, leadership roles, assessment, adjustment to old age, drug abuse, and managerial skills.

The next most frequently appearing

FIGURE 2
SUBJECTS OF GERONTOLOGICAL NURSING
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES



subject focuses on the health care needs of the elderly (14.5%). Although some of these articles deal with institutionalized care, most of them center on community programs. Two recurring messages contained in newspaper articles in this category were the need for community services to the aged, and the increase in development of innovative nursing outreach services. A central theme communicated to the reading public is that many elderly people cannot afford, and do not need expensive and often impersonal institutionalized care.

One of the innovative gerontological nursing services receiving attention in this article category is the placement of nurses and other health care providers in large apartment complexes where the elderly live. The *Arizona Daily Star*, for example, ran an article which featured such a service in Tucson's four city-run housing complexes where in-house clinics are offered four days a week. It emphasized that not only does this arrangement provide the advantage of expert care close at hand, but it also allows earlier intervention at lesser cost and more comfort.¹³

A cost-effective type of service, home care for the elderly, receives considerable coverage in newspapers around the country. The *News Sentinel*

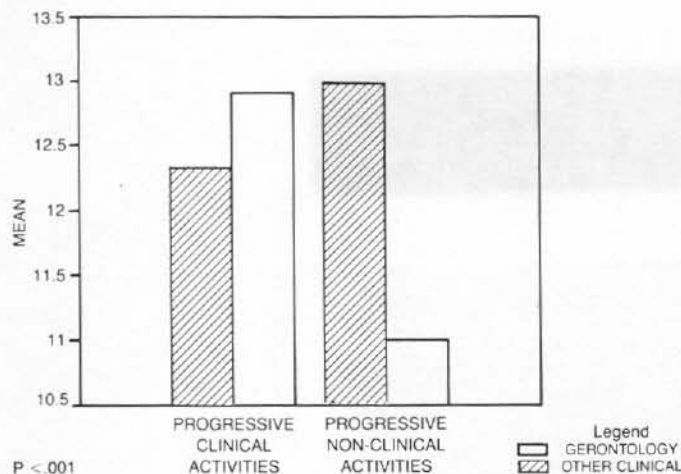
in Stigler, Oklahoma, for example, quoted a patient who described a home health care nurse this way: "She's doing more for this country than any other organization. I was nearly dead when she started on me."¹³

One of the extensive efforts to reach out to the elderly was reported in the *Evansville Press*, Evansville, Indiana on November 13, 1978. Nurses from the gerontology center of the University of Evansville are shown traveling through a six-county area in a motor home to provide health assessment and preventive health care service and education to the aged population in these areas.¹⁵

An educational subject area that receives attention in the newspapers is the establishment of gerontological nursing courses and programs that prepare nurses to deal with the special needs of the elderly. Of the total sample of gerontological nursing articles, 12.5% of them center on the development of such educational experiences, either at the basic and graduate nurse preparation level, or for graduate nurses in the community. These courses are shown to focus on assessment, research, special skills, myths about the elderly, and special problems faced by the aged ill.

One example of this type of story

FIGURE 3
PROFESSIONAL NURSING ACTIVITIES IN
GERONTOLOGICAL NEWSPAPER ARTICLES



focused on the development of such a course offered at Purdue University. The professor offering the course is quoted as saying:

We're trying to clear up some misunderstanding about aging and the elderly . . . and the best way to start is to put ourselves in the places of older people . . . to try to deal with the restrictions and frustrations they face daily just because they are old.¹⁶

Another 10.4% of the gerontological nursing articles describe nurses teaching the elderly. Nurses are shown giving instruction in the proper use of medicine, foot care, immunizations, exercise, stress reduction, nursing home care, and safety in the home.

An example article in this category was published in the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky. It featured a nurse who spends a good deal of her time in "addressing groups of elderly persons throughout the community about their health concerns." This nurse says she was not prepared "for the spirited question/answer exchange that has proven how much her elderly audiences want to understand the aging process and its effects on their general well-being."¹⁷

A small group of articles (6.3%) cover various gerontological nursing

professional issues. Many of these announce the election of officers to gerontological nursing organizations. Other articles describe the establishment of new organizations. A few deal with political and economics issues affecting nurses' ability to provide care for the elderly.

The *Herald News* of Durham, North Carolina, for example, carried such an article in which Dr. Virginia Stone points out:

Nurses in private practice are not eligible for medicare and medicaid payments as physicians are. The state supplements salaries of physicians needed to practice in rural areas. Shouldn't the salaries of nurses be supplemented, too?¹⁸

The last subject category is comprised of news articles describing the results of research conducted by gerontological nurses. While accounting for only 2% of the total number of gerontological nursing articles, they are quite dramatic. For example, one nurse's work on suicide among the elderly was published as follows.

Elderly people suffer many losses that often follow each other closely . . . They don't have time to fully recover from one loss before another one occurs. Multiple losses

with no time in between for recovery can lead to serious depression.¹⁹

Newspaper articles portray gerontological nurses as less likely to engage in progressive clinical nursing activities than nurses in other clinical specialties.* These activities include emotional support of patients and their families, nursing process activities, expanded role functions, patient education, technical procedures, or acting as a resource to other health care providers. Gerontological nurses referred to in newspaper articles, however, are more likely to engage in the progressive non-clinical activities of administration, teaching, and scholarly work than are nurses in the other clinical specialties*.

When the professional relationships of gerontological nurses are compared with those of nurses in other clinical specialties, only one difference emerges—gerontological nurses have more positive relationships with educational programs*. Overall, communication between gerontological nurses and physicians, hospitals, nursing homes, consumers, other nurses, and the government is portrayed in relatively positive terms. In analyzing changes over time, gerontological nurse relationships with nurses, physicians, hospitals and nursing homes, educational programs, consumers, and the government, are showing a downward trend*.

In conclusion, the news media is increasing the supply of health information to the public. The morning newspaper, not nurses and physicians, tells the public about the latest gerontological advances, and syndicated health care columnists give advice on how to stay well.

The results of this study show that the potential for reaching the public with information about the quality and extent of gerontological nursing services is still largely untapped. The small number of articles, and the poor geographic distribution of the articles published, leaves a large portion of the public with virtually no information about gerontological nurses and the important services they offer.

The potential for feature stories is particularly unrealized. This is because gerontological nurses have not de-

veloped the skills to market newsworthy ideas. Gerontological nurses are often not aware of the importance of public opinion about their specialty and its power to garner resources allowing them to provide their services to the elderly.

While the quality of most articles published about gerontological nursing is relatively good, considerable room for improvement exists. For example, the articles need to place more emphasis on the innovative, cost-effective roles and services that gerontological nurses are pioneering.

The public is entitled to information about the wide range of services gerontological nurses provide and the advantages of these services relative to those available from other health care providers. Unfortunately, an analysis of the newspapers' depictions of gerontological nurses shows a decline in the quality of relationships and no growth in the inclusion of progressive professional activities. These findings further emphasize the need for gerontological nurses to reach the general public through the press.

Although many factors contribute to the rapid growth in the need for public information about gerontological nursing in this country, the single greatest factor is the aging of our population. In the past 50 years, the proportion of the population age 65 and older has more than doubled, from 5.4% in 1930 to 11.3% in 1980. This trend is expected to continue, with a near doubling again in the proportion over 65 to 20% by 2030.

As one indication of the escalating market for gerontological nursing services, expenditures for nursing home care have soared from \$480 million in 1960, to \$31 billion in 1983, and are expected to reach \$82 billion by 1990. The assurance of quality gerontological nursing care is important for this vulnerable population. This is especially critical at a time when patient care needs are increasing and becoming potentially more costly while states, due to difficulties in financing their Medicaid nursing home services, have been trying to reduce the growth of their reimbursement rates.

Unless the public is kept informed

about the contributions of gerontological nurses and the key role they play in health care, consumers cannot be expected to offer the vital support needed to advance the specialty.

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*This finding was significant at the .05 level.

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Public Relations

KEY POINTS

Kalisch PA, Kalisch BJ: Gerontological nursing gets expert help on using the news. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 1985; 11(4):31-35.

1. The news media is the most effective means of disseminating information about gerontological nursing to health care consumers.

2. A large portion of the public has virtually no information about gerontological nurses and the services they offer. The potential for reaching the public with information about gerontological nursing services is largely untapped.

3. Nurses should write more letters to the editor to reach the public and convey ideas and concerns.

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