

Newspapers and Nursing

THE PRINT MEDIA IMAGE OF PERIOPERATIVE NURSES

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NURSE! Taken for granted, surgical nurses are there when a life is on the line.¹

Lord knows you have to keep the (operating room) nurses' minds on what's going on.²

Both of the above quotes appeared in newspapers and point to the ongoing challenge of communicating an effective image of the perioperative nurse to the public. This article discusses a study of articles on perioperative nursing that appeared in newspapers over a four-year period.

Media expert Marshall McLuhan said news media are "sense extensions," forming images for individuals who cannot directly experience all of the events that occur in the world.³ Images surround everyone; some images we develop ourselves, and others are developed for us—but either way, images represent something.

News media messages—images—about perioperative nurses help create public opinion about the worth of nurses in this specialty. What the public knows and believes about the existence and effectiveness of perioperative nurses therefore plays a key role in determining the resources that will be allocated to support and advance their services.

The importance of the press in disseminating information and creating public opinion is illustrated by the fact that 78% of adults report reading a newspaper every day.⁴ Studies also indicate that newspapers are regarded by readers as a primary source of information. Newspeople determine what is news—what will be covered and what will not be covered—and therefore affect

who and what will emerge into issues for public discussion and action. The Davey Report of the Special Committee on Mass Media concluded that "newspapers are felt to be the most essential medium. . . . They are the most diligent in keeping the public informed. More than any media, they are perceived to represent the public conscience."⁵

Changing Health Care Economics

Expenditures for health care climbed from 5% to more than 11% of the gross national product between 1960 and 1984. There is no formula for determining a precise limit on what our country can afford to spend for health care, but there is definitely a limit. More policymakers are becoming convinced that the government must intervene to contain costs. Medicare prospective reimbursement was designed to do just that—contain costs. Equally



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dramatic changes have been occurring in the private sector, with insurance companies adopting various approaches to prospective pricing and other insurers creating preferred provider arrangements.

The intensity of the competition emerging as a result of the rapid, nearly continuous, and sometimes chaotic changes in health care was underscored at the American College of Surgeons meeting last October. A report of the meeting read:

The tone was sounded early in a keynote speech by William S. Kiser, MD, the chief executive officer of the Cleveland Clinic. He elaborated: 'Jungle ethics are replacing professional ethics. Clearly we are in a buyer's market today. Medical care is in the hands of the consumer. This game of 'Medical Monopoly' is a high-stake game involving dog-eat-dog competition that you didn't learn in medical school. And the big dogs are at an advantage. Groups of hospitals and physicians are trying to 'capture' patients, and government, employers, and consumers are 'shopping around' for the best medical deal. There are five players in the game: federal and state governments; business and other third-party payers; insurers and intermediaries; consumers; and you—the providers, the physicians, and hospitals. The winners will survive, the losers will go bankrupt, the government will act as referee, and ultimately the consumer will be the better off, though I know it is hard for many of you

*to accept.'*⁶

Perhaps the biggest contributing factor to rising health care costs is the nation's overabundance of hospitals. In addition, of the more than 70 million surgical procedures performed each year in the US, about two-thirds are being done on an ambulatory basis, causing many hospitals to operate at 40% to 60% occupancy. Forecasters say that as many as 500 of our nearly 7,000 hospitals may soon be forced to close their doors, and many more may be acquired by large for-profit hospital corporations. Predictions for shrinkage in the hospital industry are quickly becoming a reality, as evidenced by a 3% decline in the number of personnel employed by hospitals—60,000 fewer in 1984 than in 1983.

To adapt to these changes, hospital nurses need to consider the advantages of marketing and public relations activities. Perioperative nurses must ensure that financial constraints on hospital budgets do not limit their ability to provide quality patient care. One of the most important ways to avoid the identification of perioperative nursing as a marginal service where noncritical cost reductions are possible is to build positive public opinion about the specialty. Marketing and public relations activities, frowned on by many hospital organizations and physicians just a few years ago, are becoming recognized as vital for hospitals and physicians and, in a similar way, for operating room nurses. News reports about perioperative nursing activities and quality variables are an important component of marketing the specialty because they create visibility and an identity for the specialty in the eyes of the public.

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Study Questions

Our concern over the political allocation of scarce resources in health care and the need for nurses to market their services effectively to the public led us to evaluate the current characteristics of newspaper reports pertaining to the work of perioperative nurses. As part of a comprehensive study of the informational quality of news media messages about all nursing subjects, this analysis focused on the quality and amount of information about the perioperative nursing specialty in newspapers. Two major areas for analysis evolved: the perioperative nursing image as it is depicted in the nation's newspapers (Phase 1) and the impact of the efforts of the Association of Operating Room Nurses, Inc, in promoting a better understanding of perioperative nursing among consumers (Phase 2).

Specific questions addressed in Phase 1 of the analysis included the following.

1. Where and to what extent is information about operating room nurses and their services made available to the public?
2. What are the dominant messages presented in newspaper articles about perioperative nursing?
3. What is the quality of news reports about perioperative nursing?
4. Does the coverage of nurses in other clinical specialties and of nurses in general differ substantially from the presentation of operating room nurses in newspapers?

Phase 2 dealt with the following questions.

1. To what extent have the efforts of AORN been successful in improving the quantity and quality of the news image of perioperative nursing?
2. Which specific activities are most likely to attract news coverage and yield a more balanced and positive image of perioperative nursing?

The answers to these questions allowed us to evaluate the extent and quality of coverage of perioperative nursing and the impact of organized activities designed to promote a better understanding of operating room nursing among consumers and policymakers. This evaluation yielded specific recommendations for further enhancement of the press image of perioperative nurses.

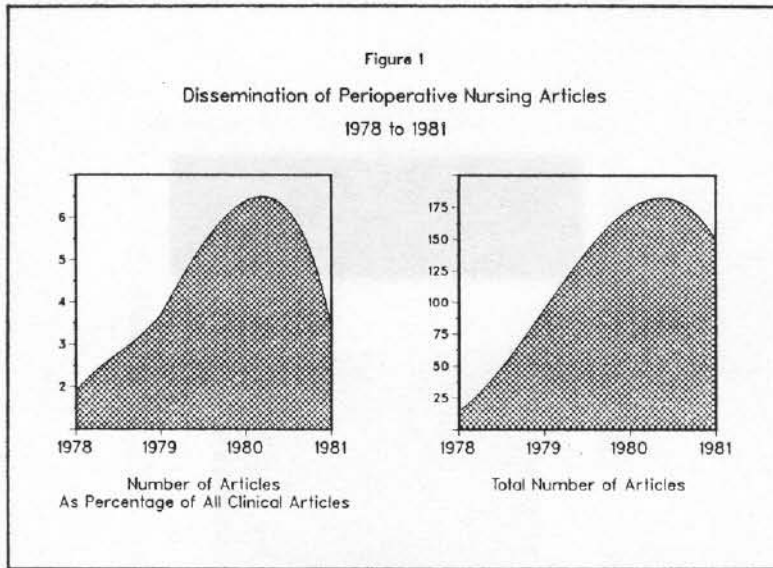
Study Method

This investigation was based on a content analysis of more than 25,000 newspaper articles about nursing published from 1978 through 1981. The articles were clipped by a nationwide clipping service that, according to its own estimates, locates approximately 80% of all articles on a subject. To verify the reliability of their sampling figures, we subscribed to an additional clipping service for three months. The results confirmed the claims of the service, as 73% of all articles were identical for each service, and no differences were found for the variables under study.

The preparation of the data for analysis was guided by the "News Analysis Tool," which was developed and tested especially for use in this project. Accordingly, coders were recruited, trained, and their reliability was assessed before the actual coding of data. Both interrater and intrarater reliability were high: 94% and 93%.

The analysis compared 238 articles on perioperative nursing with 4,645 articles on other clinical subjects and 20,160 articles on nonclinical subjects. News stories about perioperative nursing comprised 4.87% of all nursing articles. There was a significant increase in the total number of news reports on nursing in general during the study period, a trend also reflected in the coverage of operating room nursing. In 1981, though, there were fewer stories on perioperative nursing than in 1980, a decline uncharacteristic of other clinical and nonclinical subjects (Fig 1).

Although perioperative nursing articles appeared more often in daily newspapers than in weekly or monthly publications, the newspapers where the articles appeared typically had smaller circulations than was true of other nursing subjects. Almost half (48.3%) were printed in newspapers with circulations of less than 100,000, whereas less than one-third of the news reports about other clinical specialties (32.2%) and only slightly more than one-fourth of the articles on nonclinical subjects (26.4%) were published in newspapers with equivalent circulation figures (Fig 2). Consequently, articles on operating room nursing reached an average of 43,487 readers, while the



comparable figure for other clinical specialties was 59,270 readers, and 76,925 for nonclinical.

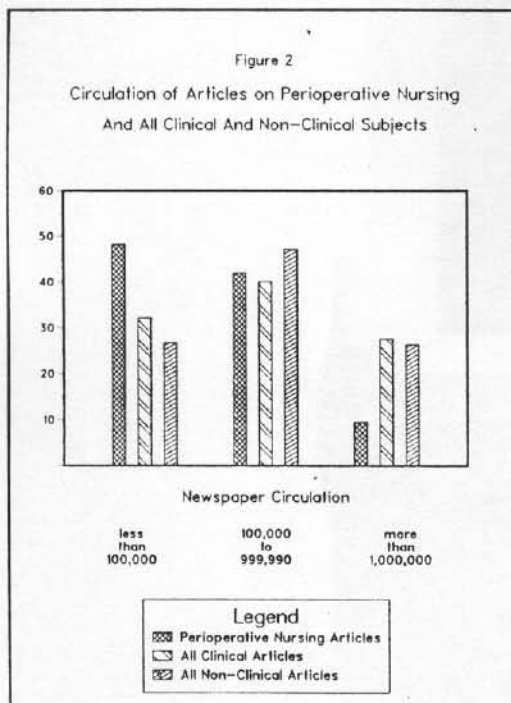
The geographical distribution of articles on perioperative nursing revealed no significant patterns that could be attributed to social and economic differences among states. Similarly, with the exception of the South, where the number

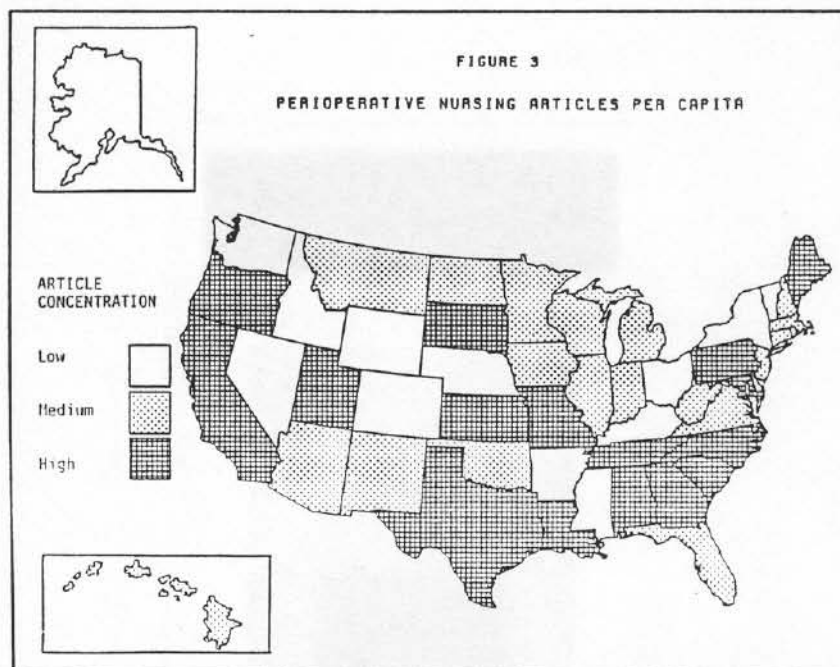
of perioperative nursing articles was consistently greater than average, there did not seem to be a regional basis for article concentration (Fig 3). The circulation figures do suggest, however, that coverage of operating room nursing was more prevalent in relatively rural areas.

Differences in Articles

The physical aspects of perioperative articles differed significantly from other nursing articles. The text size averaged 20% smaller than articles focusing on the other clinical specialties (all relationships reported were significant at the .05 probability level). Other characteristics, however, seem to compensate for their reduced size. The average photograph accompanying operating room nursing articles was twice as large as those illustrating news reports on other clinical specialties and four times larger than those accompanying nonclinical subjects. The same relationships were maintained with respect to the number of photographs. Although the headlines were significantly larger than those introducing nonclinical subjects, there were no differences with respect to the placement of the articles in the publication.

Perioperative nursing articles were seven times more likely to be feature stories than news reports on nonclinical subjects, and twice as likely as those





on other clinical subjects. None of the operating room nursing stories originated from a wire service, and fewer letters to the editor were written by OR nurses.

The newspaper depiction of perioperative nursing practice differed from the presentation of other clinical specialties in several ways. First, perioperative nursing articles were twice as likely to focus exclusively on the role of the nurse, yet were four times less likely than news reports on the other clinical specialties to feature the nurse in an innovative role.

Despite a greater emphasis on ambulatory surgery, perioperative nursing articles were more likely to be presented in the context of restorative and institutional care than were news reports about the other clinical specialties. As will be noted in Figure 4, not only did perioperative nursing news emphasize more progressive nursing activities, eg, providing emotional support, nursing process activities, but they also included a greater number of traditional clinical activities, such as physical comforting care. With the exception of expanded role responsibilities, actual hands-on nursing care of all types received greater attention in

perioperative news reports. The clarity of the operating room nurses' role as presented in many news reports is exemplified in the following statement from a 1980 newspaper story.

*"As operating room nurses, we watch over the entire procedure, which begins long before surgery with preoperative care. . . . We are a team, and the team includes the patient, the surgeon, the surgical technician, and the team leader—the registered nurse."*⁷

The work of the operating room nurse, compared to other clinical specialties, was subject to more praise in newspapers. One example of such praise appeared in an Alabama newspaper in 1981.

*"She's a part-time mechanic, a part-time mind reader, a part-time orthopedic specialist, a part-time inventory supervisor, and a full-time professional. She's a surgical nurse—a highly skilled top-flight registered nurse whose daily responsibilities include all of the above and much, much more."*⁸

In an analysis of who praised perioperative nurses, we found that their articles were three times more likely to contain praise of each other, as

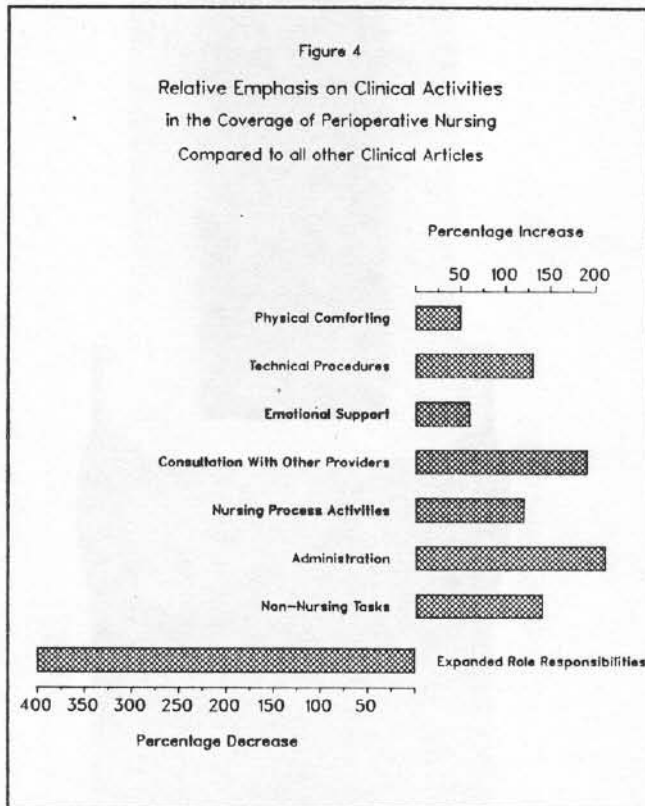
well as three times more likely to include positive comments by patients than news about the other clinical specialties.

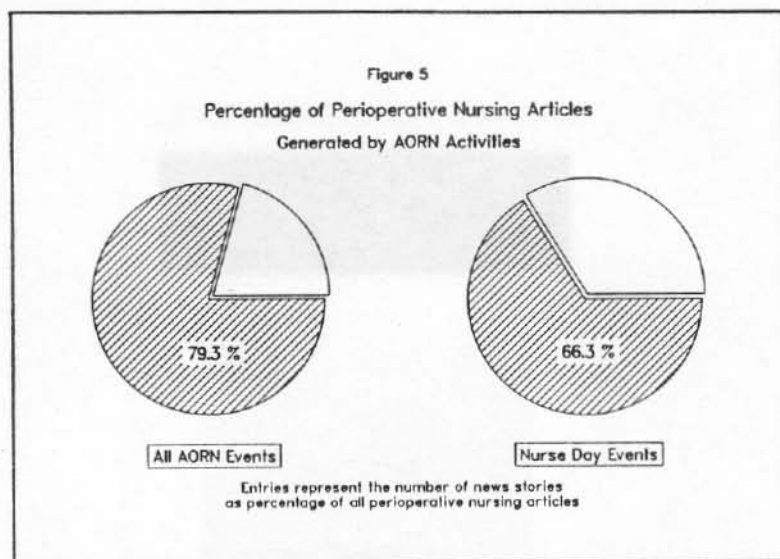
On the other hand, operating room nursing articles generally deemphasized professional issues, and even when professional issues were discussed, the articles were less likely to explore the causes of such problems. For example, news reports on the specialty were less likely to include an investigation into topics pertaining to the nurses' position in the hospital authority structure. Perioperative nursing articles were nine times less likely to deal with labor supply problems and nurse shortages than other news reports about nursing. Similarly, perioperative nursing articles contained little information about any of the economic issues in nursing or health care in general. Inadequate funding for nursing services, for example, was mentioned seven times less often than in news stories about the other clinical specialties. These articles were also 16 times less likely than stories on other clinical subjects to

highlight the fact that nursing care is cost effective.

Of all the differences between the coverage of clinical specialties and perioperative nursing, the lack of concern with the public's access to a quality health care system was most dominant. The other clinical articles addressed this issue 43.5 times more often than did operating room news. Perioperative nurses were also five times less likely to be shown relating to politicians and being involved in political activities than in news coverage of nurses in the other clinical specialties.

Mention of the nurses' personal economic or professional status was rare. One exception was the issue of long hours and excessive workloads, which was included four times more often in the perioperative articles than in news reports focusing on the other clinical specialties. But a further review of the data led to the conclusion that long hours were presented more as an aspect of the nature of the work of the perioperative nurse than to highlight a professional problem. Corroborating this finding is the fact that self-sacrifice of the





nurse was communicated twice as often in operating room newspaper reports as in those about the other clinical specialties.

AORN-generated News

Over the past 15 years, AORN has made a major effort to define and delineate the perioperative nurse's distinct professional identity and responsibilities as a member of a team of health care professionals. It has also made a concerted effort to develop consumer awareness about perioperative nurses' significant role in health care. The results of our analysis indicate that these efforts have been quite effective. Of all newspaper articles on perioperative nursing, 79.3% contained stories about activities originating with, or sponsored by, AORN (Fig 5). These AORN-generated news reports reflected a positive image of the specialty.

A comparison between AORN-related coverage and the other perioperative nursing articles showed that AORN news was more likely than other perioperative news to portray the nurse in a consulting role with other health care personnel (105%), giving emotional support to patients and their families (100%), and educating the patient about their health care (75%) (Fig 6).

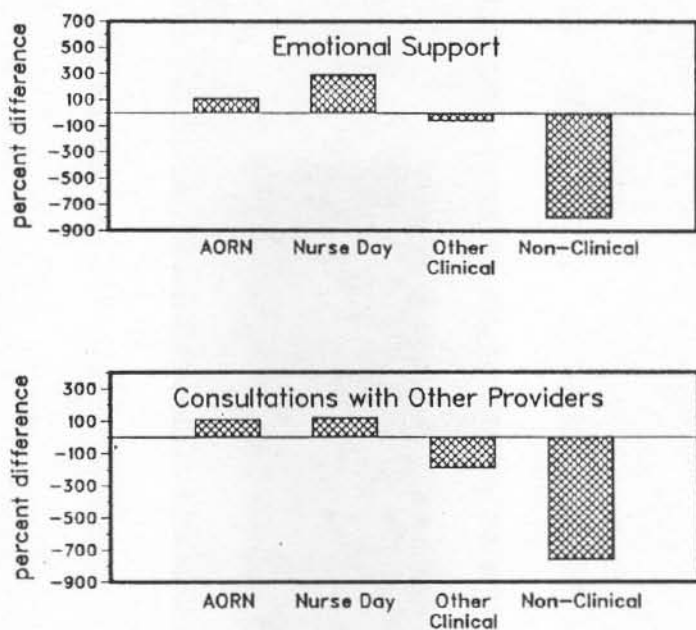
Among activities initiated or sponsored by AORN to generate news, news reports about OR

Nurse Day activities proved to be particularly effective. The articles covering the event represented 66.3% of all news reports on perioperative nursing, and because these articles, in all likelihood, did not preempt other coverage of perioperative nursing, it is estimated that without the celebration of OR Nurse Day, two-thirds fewer articles on operating room nursing practice would have appeared.

Stories on OR Nurse Day enhanced several aspects of the already positive image associated with AORN news reports. Compared with the other AORN-generated news, the reports of OR Nurse Day were 10 times more likely to concentrate on nursing as their primary subject matter, four times more likely to mention nursing in the headline, and three times more likely to discuss the professional role of the nurse. Emotional support of patients and their families, patient education, and acting as a consultant to other providers were emphasized to a greater extent in these articles as well. Coverage of OR Nurse Day events actually projected the most balanced presentation of the complexities of perioperative nursing practice of all articles on the subject.

OR Nurse Day news reports further consisted of two types: those announcing the upcoming day and those describing what happened. Those announcing the event were less effective in

Figure 6
Differences in Perioperative News Versus
AORN, Nurse Day Events, Other Clinical and Non-Clinical News



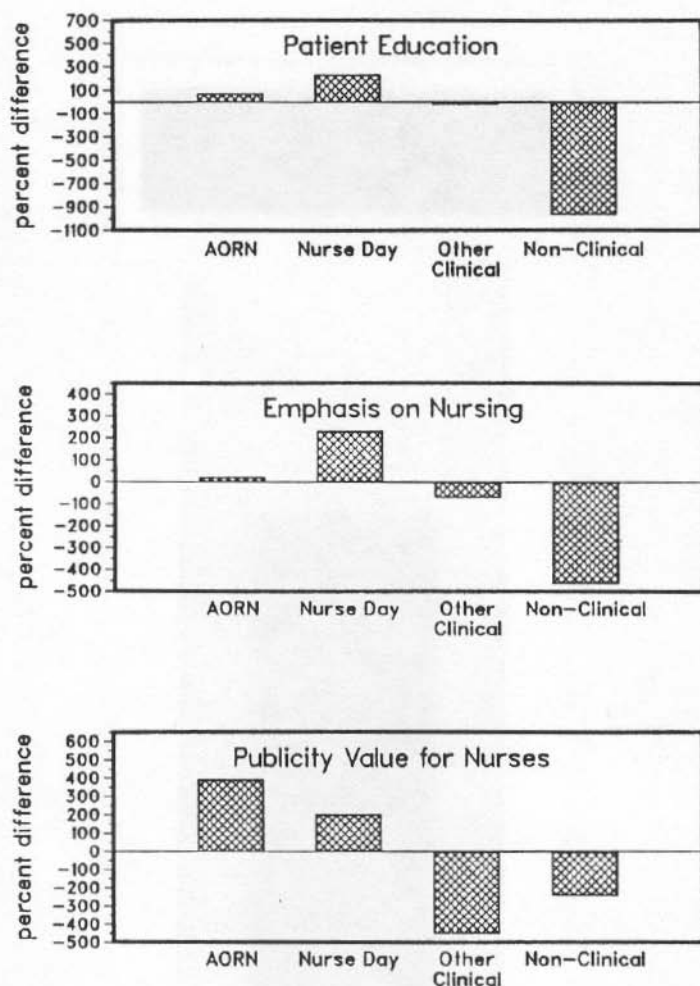
conveying a positive image than the actual coverage of events; they contained fewer photographs, smaller text and headlines, and the reports were more one-dimensional. Some OR Nurse Day organizers developed creative methods to get newspapers to report more fully on the upcoming event by inviting journalists to the hospital before the date, explaining the nurses' professional responsibilities, and introducing them to the operating room. This generated pre-event coverage characterized by a more vivid, dynamic, and positive image of operating room nursing practice. Photographs were often taken during

these visits and helped convey the nurses' complex duties in a more direct and nontechnical manner.

Not only did the activities of AORN greatly increase the number of news reports, but they also added a greater depth to the image of the perioperative nurse.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This analysis indicates that in the past few years, the news media has projected a relatively positive image of perioperative nursing. Perioperative nurses were depicted in



direct and vital care-giving roles, little confusion existed about their role, and they were praised by patients for their contributions to health care. Despite the positive nature of the coverage, however, there is too little of it and its dissemination is highly constricted. Every year, literally hundreds of potential feature stories about perioperative nursing fail to be published by newspapers. With more than 6,000 hospitals and 80,000 perioperative nurses in the country, the number of articles on operating room nursing is extremely low.

Because OR Nurse Day news accounted for

the growth of news about the specialty after 1979, one is left to wonder how much perioperative nursing news would have been published without this annual celebration and the publicity efforts surrounding it. As can be seen in Figure 1, the proportion of articles devoted to perioperative nursing in 1981 was returning to 1978 levels, which were attained without the benefit of OR Nurse Day celebrations. This indicates that the coverage of such activities is far from reaching its full potential, and in fact is not keeping up with the rate of increase in the coverage of other clinical specialties or nonclinical subjects.

When an OR nurse receives an award or is selected for an honor, a press release should be sent to all area newspapers.

This analysis did establish the preeminent role assumed by the Association of Operating Room Nurses in communicating an accurate and progressive image of perioperative nursing practice. The two activities that received the most coverage, and therefore were most responsible for the positive image presented in the news media were OR Nurse Day events and the issues surrounding the professional certification of operating room nurses; both activities were initiated by AORN. These actions promoted a positive image of perioperative nursing and helped to educate the public about the broadening role of the perioperative nurse to include preoperative assessment and postoperative evaluation. These efforts have done a great deal to deemphasize the sole importance of the intraoperative phase of perioperative nursing practice, which perpetuated a one-dimensional image of the nurse as a technician. These findings suggest a number of recommendations for the further enhancement of the news media image of the perioperative nurse.

A large number of creative ideas have emerged from AORN local chapters around the country, and it would be most helpful if a systematic method to disseminate experience with OR Nurse Day among future organizers could be developed. Part of the AORN booth at the annual Congress is devoted to this effort. It might also be helpful for perioperative nurses to recognize that although the celebration of OR Nurse Day itself is important, media coverage of the event influences more people than does the event itself. If perioperative nurses focus exclusively on planning and implementing the celebrations and view the seeking of news media attention as a burden to the main event—honoring or calling attention to operating room nurses—the opportunity to improve the image of operating room nurses will be greatly diminished.

Seeking news coverage of OR Nurse Day events, however, is only the beginning. There are

many potentially newsworthy stories that also need to be developed throughout the year. Appointments of perioperative nurses to new positions, for example, deserve newspaper coverage and offer an excellent opportunity to convey up-to-date information about the specialty. When an operating room nurse receives an award or is selected for an honor, a press release should be sent to all area newspapers, including weekly shoppers and organization newsletters. Some groups of perioperative nurses hold benefits and fundraisers or contribute their time and effort to a community cause, but fail to seek news coverage of their work. Although it is sometimes difficult, nurses need to overcome their tendency toward modesty. The public cannot use information it does not have, and only operating room nurses can convey this information to them. Other newsworthy items include organizational actions and elections, conventions and meetings, and any unusual subject or events.

News reporting about operating room nurses can be facilitated by effective, well-written press releases, which are one of the most important publicity tools. They almost always refer to an event, and it is usually one in the future. There are six important ingredients in a news release: who, what, when, where, why, and how. But even more important is that it must be written in a manner that will interest the reader, particularly in the first few sentences, because the editorial decision to use it or not will largely rest on the impression of the opening sentences. Press releases are rarely longer than a page in length, primarily because only essential news should be covered and also because they are often printed just as they are received. It is unlikely that a newspaper will give it the space that two or three typed pages would require. Even if it is printed, half of the facts may disappear as the release is cut to fit into the available space. It is best, therefore, to use the "inverted pyramid" style: the most

Personal contacts with newspaper editors and reporters are important because they distinguish OR nurses from other groups in the same community.

important items are in the first sentences, followed by those of lesser importance, with quotations and discussions of the general issue, and ending with a description of the group or organization.

Our study indicates that few perioperative nurses have used the letter to the editor as a way to gain newspaper coverage, yet it is an excellent way to get a message across to the public. Equally important, letters to the editor are viewed by both readers and the newspaper staff as a gauge of public sentiment. Letters are "the voice of the people," and a newspaper might even evaluate a position on the basis of a large letter-to-the-editor campaign. A network of perioperative nurses that can be counted on to write letters to the editor of the local press when needed is valuable.

Personal contacts with newspaper editors and reporters are important because they distinguish operating room nurses from other groups in the community. Discussing issues with reporters and editors personally will, at the very least, familiarize them with the salient issues of operating room nursing, but it may also serve to gain their support. And it will definitely increase the likelihood of their publishing perioperative nursing issues that are brought to their attention. Newspaper representatives may begin to turn to you for statements regarding current surgical treatment and the role of the perioperative nurse in that treatment if they have a sense of confidence in your fairmindedness and reliability.

Although these activities may at first seem foreign to some operating room nurses, and even somewhat discomforting, it is important to recognize that unless the public is kept informed about the contributions of perioperative nurses, neither consumers nor policymakers can be expected to support their work or allocate the required resources to carry out their responsibilities in health care. The potential benefits are great: the establishment of important links to the print

media; a greatly improved understanding of the work of perioperative nurses on the part of newspaper editors and journalists; increased skills of operating room nurses in gaining the attention of the media; and most important, an increased assertiveness of perioperative nurses in relationships with the public and policymakers. □

Notes

1. "Nurse! Taken for granted, surgical nurses are there when a life is on the line," *San Diego Beach Press*, Nov 14, 1984.
2. "A little knife music," *Washington Post*, Nov 27, 1984.
3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: New American Library, 1973).
4. Edward Jay Whetmore, *Mediamerica: Form, Content, and Consequence of Mass Communication* (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Co, Inc, 1979) 23.
5. Special Committee on Mass Media, *Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry*, 3 (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1977).
6. "Surgeons warily face competitive crunch," *American Medical News*, Nov 23, 1984, 29.
7. "ACH operating room nurse part of a very special team," *Register*, Iola, Kansas, Nov 15, 1980.
8. "Operating room nursing," *Mountain Eagle*, Jasper, Ala, Sept 7, 1981.

Correction

In the article entitled, "Implementing AORN's Recommended Practices," (*May Journal*, p 970), there is an error. Proposed recommended practices are not reviewed by the AORN Board of Directors for comment prior to publication. They are reviewed by the Board after all comments from members are in and have been reviewed by the Recommended Practices Subcommittee and the Technical Practices Coordinating Committee.