

PSYCHIATRIC NURSES AND THE PRESS: A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP

by Philip A. Kalisch and Beatrice J. Kalisch

THE delivery of psychiatric nursing in the United States is inextricably tied to public opinion about psychiatric nurses and their services. And public opinion is formed largely by news media.

Newspapers have tremendous power as sensitization instruments, and the public increasingly uses the news media as aids for coping with an increasingly complicated society. Ninety percent of adults read a newspaper each day. Consequently, the ways in which psychiatric nurses are presented, misrepresented, or underrepresented in the news media strongly affect people's notions of the role of psychiatric nurses as it is and as it ought to be. Indicators of exactly what messages are being transmitted to the public are of vital importance for the present and future of both psychiatric nurses and the public they serve.

What then is the quality of news about psychiatric nurses communicated via the nation's newspapers? As part of a comprehensive study of the informational quality of all nursing news, 143 psychiatric nursing newspaper articles are compared with 4,740 stories focusing on the other clinical specialties of community health, parent-child, and medical-surgical nursing, and with 20,180 non-clinical articles.

Collection of the data involved employing a clipping service to clip all newspaper articles with the

word "nurse" or "nursing," except for obituaries and wedding announcements, in every newspaper published in the United States. The articles, which are identified as to newspaper name, location, circulation, date of publication, and page placement, are coded by trained coders using the "News Analysis Tool" developed and tested for use in the project. All the articles are coded for the even numbered years; for the alternate years, a 20% random sample is coded. Coder intrarater reliability is 93% and interrater reliability is 94%. This report contains the results of the analysis of newspaper articles pertaining to psychiatric nursing that were published in the four-year period, January, 1978 to December, 1981.

The specific questions addressed in this study are:

- (1) What is the audience exposure to psychiatric nurses and their services via the press?
- (2) What characteristics are being conveyed to the public about psychiatric nurses, their practice, and their professional relationships?
- (3) What is the quality of the image of psychiatric nursing presented in newspapers?
- (4) What differences exist in newspaper coverage of psychiatric nursing versus other clinical nursing specialties and non-clinical articles?
- (5) What changes have occurred in the presentation of psychiatric nursing over time?

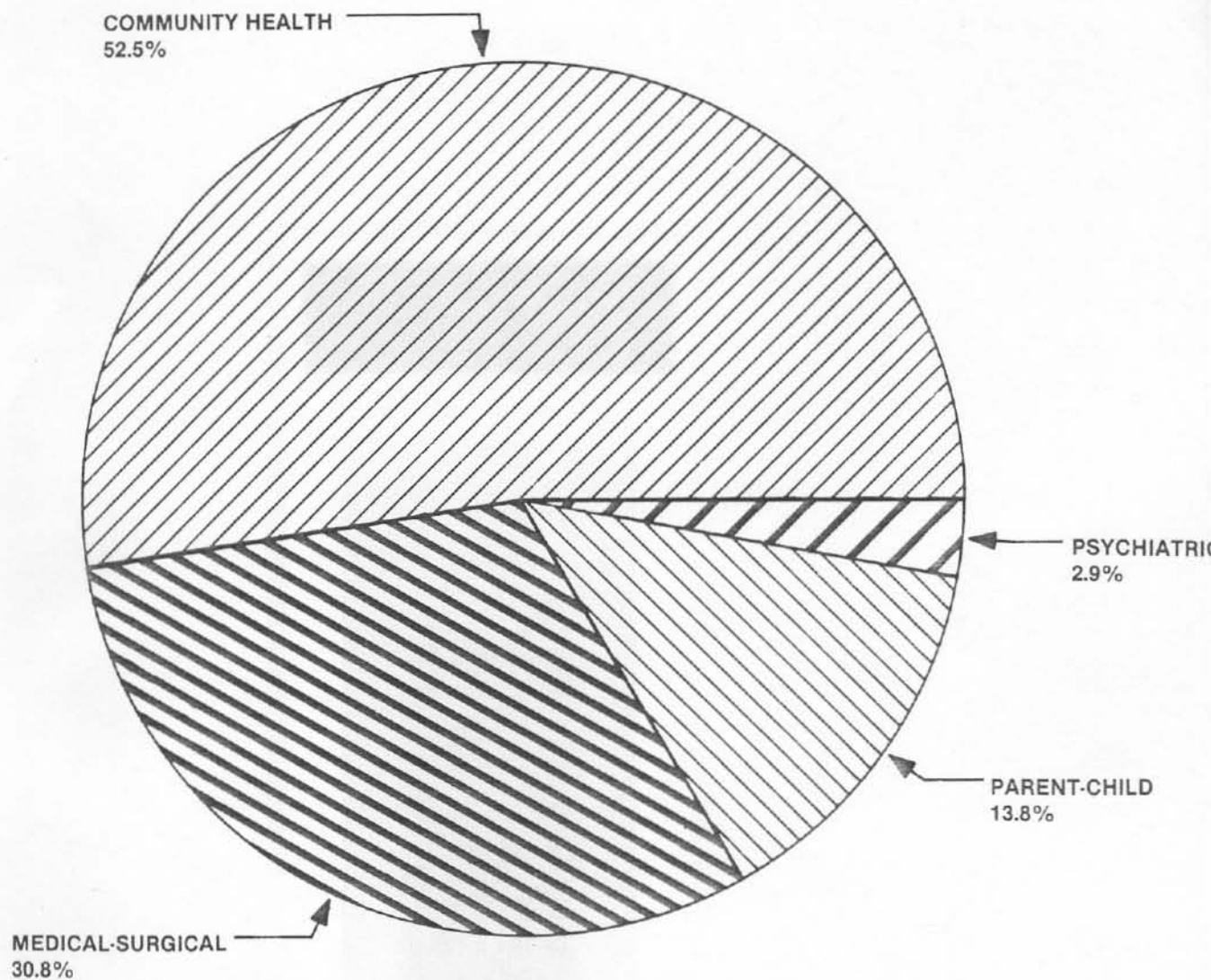


FIGURE 1
CLINICAL NURSING SPECIALTIES IN NEWSPAPERS

STUDY RESULTS

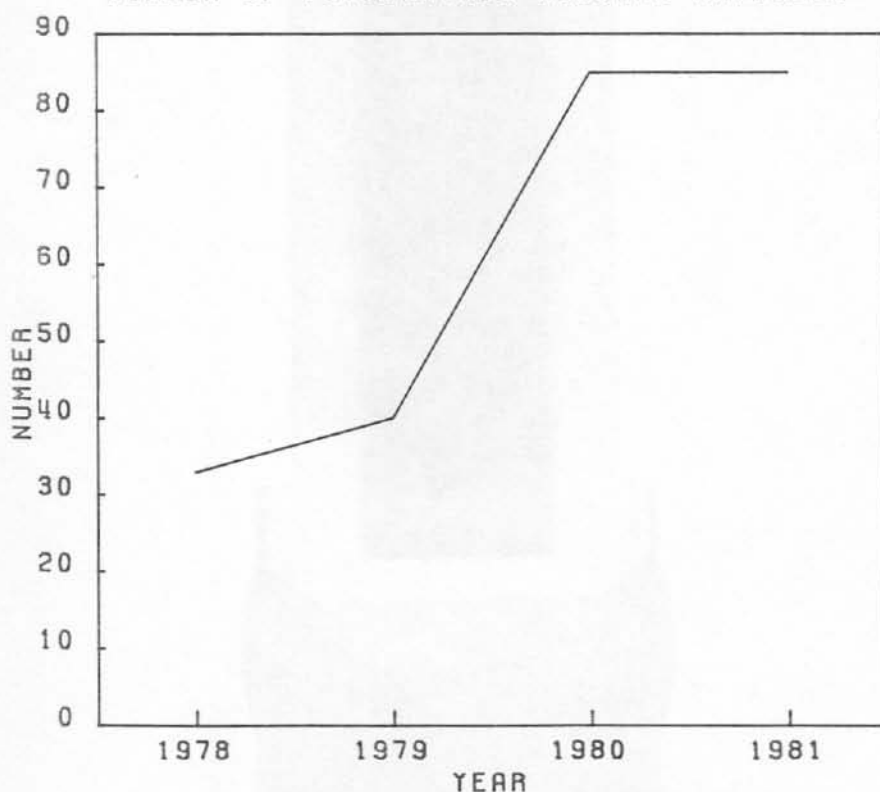
Psychiatric nursing articles constitute only 2.9% of the total number of clinical articles, the poorest of the four nursing specialties. Community nursing is highest in the number of articles with 52.5% of the total, while medical-surgical nursing, with 30.8%, is second in frequency. The remaining 13.8% focus on the clinical specialty of pediatric nursing (Figure 1). Psychiatric nursing accounts for only 0.57% of the total number of nursing articles. Psychiatric nursing articles increased in number from 33 articles in 1978 to 85 articles in 1981 (Figure 2). As will be seen in Figure 3, however, since there has been a decline in the number of articles about all nursing subjects, the ac-

tual percentage of nursing articles that focus on psychiatric nursing has declined. The percentage of clinical articles devoted to psychiatric nursing hovered about the same level (0.41 to 1.40) during the four years studied.

Content of Articles

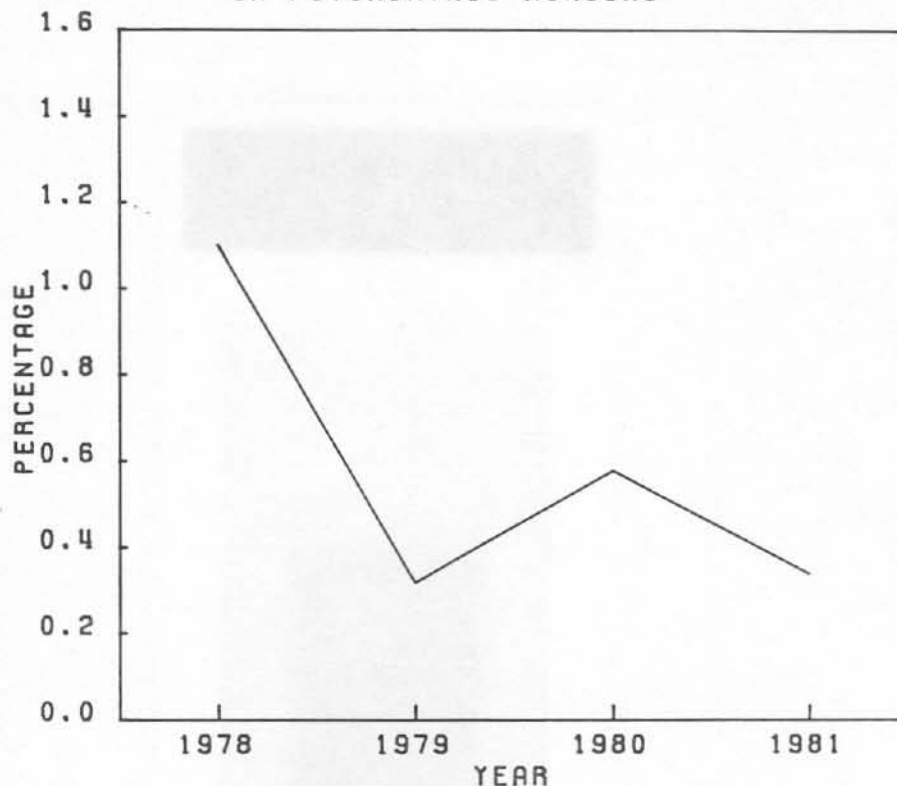
Psychiatric nursing articles are written on a relatively limited number of subjects. Over one-third focus on care of the institutionalized mentally ill (33.6%). Community mental health nursing constitutes only 13.9% of psychiatric nursing articles even though it is the second largest category. Following closely behind is substance abuse (12.6%),

FIGURE 2
NUMBER OF PSYCHIATRIC NURSING ARTICLES*



*1979 AND 1981 ARE CORRECTED FOR THE
20% SAMPLE OF THESE TWO YEARS

FIGURE 3
PROPORTION OF TOTAL NURSING ARTICLES FOCUSING
ON PSYCHIATRIC NURSING



the role of the psychiatric nursing clinical specialist and clinician (12.6%), independent practice (5.6%), care of the rape victim (5.6%), and care of the domestic violence victim (1.4%). The remaining articles are on a variety of low frequency subjects.

A number of these subjects have changed over the four-year period of time studied. Care of the institutionalized mentally ill, the dominant subject, is increasing in magnitude. In 1978, it was 27.3% of the total, but by 1981, 52.9% of the psychiatric nursing articles focused on this subject. Substance abuse and care of the rape victim also showed increases. Independent practice declined from 12% in 1978 to only 5.9% in 1981. When the articles that emphasize the progressive clinical roles of psychiatric nurses (e.g. nurse clinician, clinical nurse specialist, independent practice, etc.) are analyzed as a whole, a marked steady decline from 1978 to 1981 is clearly evident (Figure 4).

Audience Exposure

Figure 5 illustrates graphically a state by state distribution of psychiatric nursing articles per capita. Sixteen states fall in the lower category with an average of only 0.5 articles per state for the total four-year period of time studied. Only marginally better dissemination is achieved in the 17 states that had the highest density of psychiatric nursing articles per capita with an average of only 4.53 articles for the four-year period. By contrast, community health nursing (the clinical specialty with the largest number of articles), averaged 19.4 articles per state on the low end and 75.7 articles on the high end over the same time span. The 10 states with the highest number of psychiatric newspaper stories are Connecticut (3.6), the District of Columbia (2.8), Nebraska (2.1), Wisconsin (2.0), New Hampshire (1.6), Hawaii (1.6), Minnesota (1.5), Oklahoma

(1.4), North Dakota (1.3), and Tennessee (1.2). The 10 states with the least press visibility for psychiatric nurses are South Dakota, Alaska, Iowa, Vermont, Alabama, Nevada, Wyoming, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

While these rankings indicate the overall exposure psychiatric nursing receives in each state, we were interested in knowing whether states that ranked high (or low) in psychiatric nursing also ranked high (or low) in nursing articles overall. We discovered that states have similar densities for psychiatric nursing as well as for nursing articles overall, with only a few exceptions. Delaware shows the greatest deviation, with fewer psychiatric nursing articles per capita than nursing articles overall. Oklahoma and the District of Columbia, on the other hand, have more psychiatric nursing articles per person than articles in general.

Psychiatric nursing articles tend to appear in large

circulation newspapers to a greater degree than those that focus on the other clinical specialties ($p < .001$), a finding that held up consistently over the four years studied. About two-thirds of the articles on psychiatric nursing are published in daily newspapers, a higher proportion than other clinical subjects ($p < .03$), while the remaining one-third appear in weekly, bi-weekly, tri-weekly, or monthly papers. Over time, psychiatric nursing articles are increasingly more likely to be published in daily newspapers.

Besides these measures of audience exposure to psychiatric nursing, newspapers clearly communicate the salience of a topic through the amount of space devoted to it, the number and size of photographs, the size of the headline, and the page placement. Audiences learn these saliences from the news media and incorporate a similar set of weights into their own personal agendas. Psychiatric nursing ar-

FIGURE 4
PROGRESSIVE CLINICAL ROLES IN PSYCHIATRIC NURSING ARTICLES

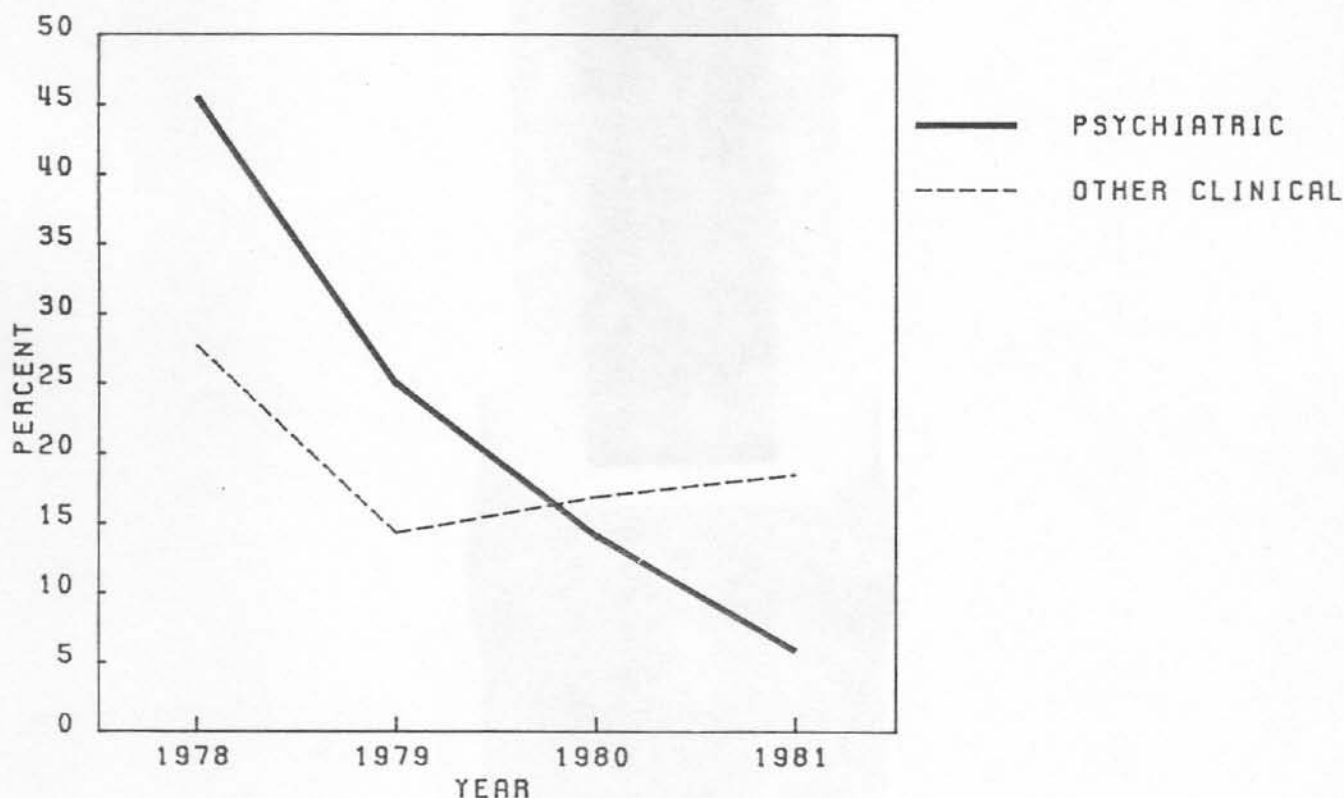
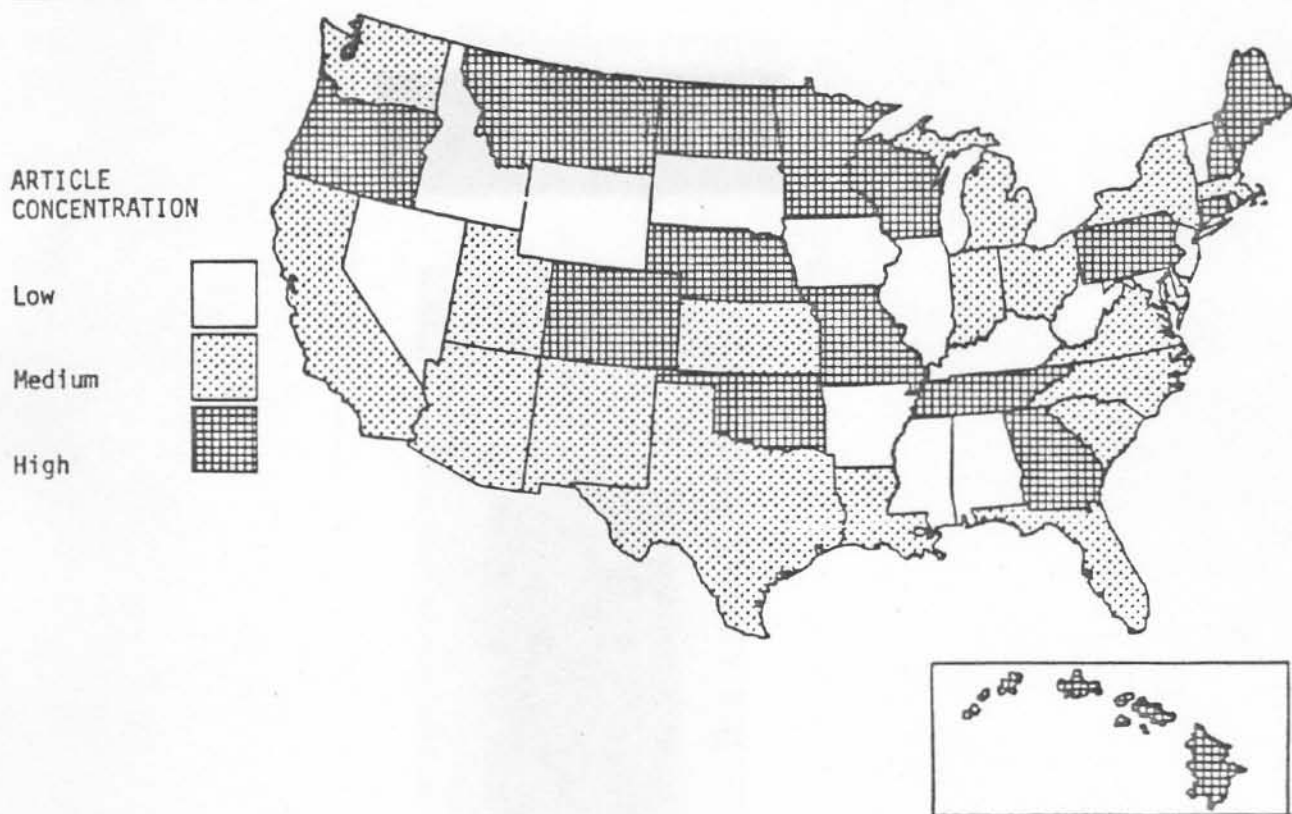




FIGURE 5

PSYCHIATRIC NURSING ARTICLES PER CAPITA



ticles are larger (38.7 square inches) than the other clinical (34.9 square inches) and non-clinical (26.3 square inches) articles. They also have bigger headlines than other clinical ($p < .03$) and non-clinical articles ($p < .001$), but they have fewer ($p < .03$) and smaller ($p < .03$) photographs than stories about the other clinical specialties. The percentage of psychiatric nursing articles which appear on page one is similar to other clinical and non-clinical subjects, about 10%. There has been a rise in the number of psychiatric nursing stories appearing on page one, however, from 2.4% to 13.7% in most recent years.

The two main categories of news are "hard news" and "soft news." Hard news concerns events and issues that are considered urgent and vital, while soft news (also known as feature or human-

interest stories), deals with issues considered interesting but without the "timely" requirement. Hard news, on the other hand, quickly becomes obsolete, while soft news can be used over a period of weeks or months. As can be noted in Figure 6, psychiatric nursing articles are more likely to be treated as soft news (41%) than other clinical (27%) and non-clinical (14%) articles (both comparisons $p < .001$). The proportion of psychiatric nursing news falling in the "soft" category declined from 41% in 1978 and 1979 to 34% in 1980 and 1981. Psychiatric nurses do write more letters to the editor than nurses practicing in other specialties (3.6% vs. 2.7%; $p < .001$), but less than nurses in non-clinical articles (5.8%). However, this activity is exceedingly rare among all nurses in general.

Demographic Characteristics of Psychiatric Nurses

As to gender, nurses in the press are almost always depicted as female, and psychiatric nurses are no different. Only 11.3% of psychiatric nurses are male, similar to 12.4% overall. Of course, this represents a higher proportion of men than actually makes up the profession (2.5%), but given the strong sex role linkage of nursing, greater exposure of men in the field is needed. It is interesting to note that while men have traditionally been employed more in psychiatric nursing than some other clinical specialties, they did not show up in larger numbers in newspaper articles.

Psychiatric nurses have more education than other nurses depicted in newspapers ($p < .001$). Psychiatric nurses are similar to nurses in the other clinical specialties in baccalaureate preparation (7.7% vs. 7.3%), but psychiatric nurses are much more likely to have graduate degrees (23.1% vs.

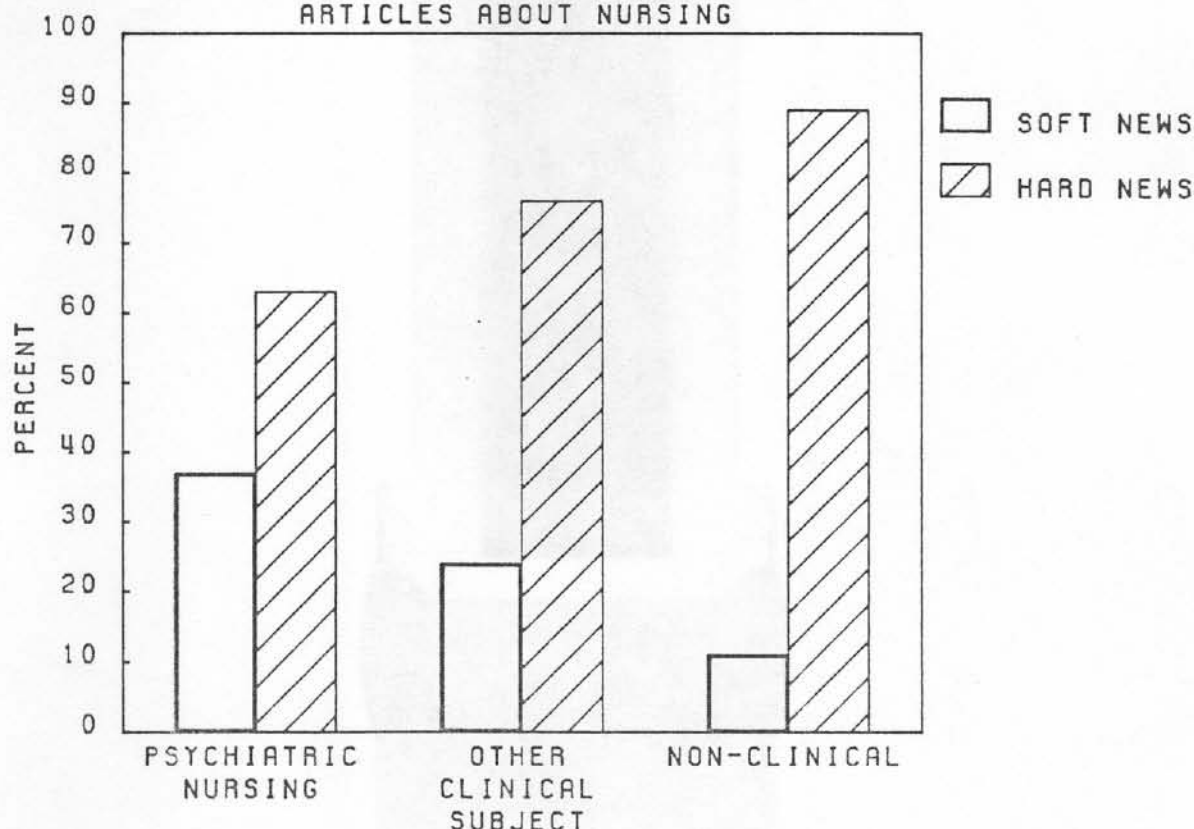
6.0%). Although baccalaureate degrees are remaining at about the same level, a decline from 32% in 1978-1979 to 20% in 1980-1981 in masters and doctoral preparation occurred from 1978 to 1981.

Characteristics of Psychiatric Nursing Practice

Psychiatric nurse portrayals in newspapers emphasize restorative care more than preventive care; much more so than in articles published about the other clinical nursing specialties ($p < .001$), but less so than in non-clinical nursing articles ($p < .001$). Psychiatric nursing stories are depicted more in institutional settings (60%) as opposed to community settings, again exceeding the other clinical specialties (33%). These findings hold up consistently across the four-year period.

As expected, newspaper articles portray psychiatric nurses engaged in providing emotional support to patients and their families significantly more than

FIGURE 6
"HARD NEWS" VS "SOFT NEWS" IN NEWSPAPER
ARTICLES ABOUT NURSING



nurses in the other clinical specialties (55% vs. 34%; $p < .001$). Psychiatric nurses are also more likely to be involved in learning activities (36% vs. 24%; $p < .001$), and scholarly work (8% vs. 2%; $p < .001$). They are less likely than other nurses in newspapers to carry out technical procedures (13% vs. 42%; $p < .01$) and expanded role functions (3% vs. 14%; $p < .01$) or use the nursing process (14% vs. 24%; $p < .01$). There are no differences found between psychiatric nurses and other nurses in their involvement in administrative or consultant work.

Psychiatric nurses are represented as citing the advantages of nurse providers over other health care professionals in the delivery of health care services more often than are nurses in the other clinical specialties ($p < .001$), and these statements are increasingly more in evidence ($p < .02$). They are also shown establishing innovative programs and services more often than nurses in other clinical specialties ($p < .001$), a characteristic that held true for all four years studied. And finally, the problem of role confusion in the press is less likely for psychiatric nurses ($p < .04$).

Professional Relationships

Clinical articles as a group depict nurses as having more positive relationships with patients and consumers ($p < .001$), health care organizations ($p < .001$), physicians ($p < .001$), and other health care professionals ($p < .001$) than do the non-clinical articles. When the relationships of psychiatric nurses are compared with nurses in other specialties, no differences in relationships with other nurses, government, health care organizations, and physicians emerge. Psychiatric nurses have more positive relationships with non-physician health care professionals ($p < .04$) and educational institutions ($p < .001$), but less positive relationships with patients and consumers ($p < .02$). Over time, psychiatric nurse relationships are becoming more negative with other nurses ($p < .05$), with patients and consumers ($p < .001$), with health care organizations ($p < .01$), with physicians ($p < .001$), and with educational institutions ($p < .001$), while they are moving toward the more positive direction with non-physician health care professionals ($p < .001$).

Although psychiatric nurses receive more praise than nurses in non-clinical articles ($p < .05$), there

is no difference between psychiatric nurses and nurses in other clinical articles in terms of praising each other or being praised by physicians, patients and consumers, politicians, or administrators. Overall praise of psychiatric nurses is rising steadily over time ($p < .001$).

Negative treatment of nurses is mentioned more often in psychiatric nursing articles than in either other clinical ($p < .001$) or non-clinical ($p < .001$) articles. Finally, psychiatric nurses are less likely to be depicted in power struggles than are nurses in the other clinical ($p < .03$) or non-clinical ($p < .001$) stories, and the power-seeking behavior that is in evidence is on the decline as far as the press is concerned ($p < .001$).

Quality of Image

Although psychiatric nursing articles are more positive than non-clinical subjects ($p < .001$), there are no significant differences between psychiatric nursing and the other clinical specialties. Headlines for the other clinical specialties, however, are more positive than those for psychiatric nursing ($p < .03$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that when psychiatric nursing articles are published in newspapers, they are more visible than articles on the other clinical specialties. They appear in larger circulation newspapers with a greater publication frequency, are bigger in size, and have larger headlines. Unfortunately, these positive features are entirely cancelled out by the markedly deficient output of newspaper articles about psychiatric nursing. Public information via the press about the role of psychiatric nurses, their unique service, and their burning issues is woefully lacking. In a large number of states, it is extremely unlikely that a citizen will read anything at all about psychiatric nursing over the course of a year. In the 16 lowest states, an average of only one-half an article was published on psychiatric nursing for the four years combined. This means that only one-eighth of an article was published per year! Even in the states with the highest number of psychiatric nursing articles (averaging 4.5 articles for the four years combined), only slightly over one article was published on psychiatric nursing per year. This leaves a large propor-

tion of the public with virtually no information about psychiatric nurses and their services.

Not only is there a problem with the quantity of articles and the inadequacy of dissemination of psychiatric nursing information to the public via the news media, but the quality of this information is also deficient. Although psychiatric nurses are better educated, are depicted in educational and scholarly work to a greater extent, are more involved in setting up innovative programs and services, are praised more, as well as experience more positive relationships with non-physician health care professionals and educational institutions ($p < .001$), and exhibit less role confusion than other nurses, a number of negative factors serve to diminish the positive impact of these findings. Psychiatric nurses are shown to heavily emphasize restorative care to the exclusion of preventive care, and are overwhelmingly depicted as practicing in institutional rather than community settings. They also are portrayed as having more negative relationships with patients, mentioning negative treatment of nurses more often, and avoiding power struggles in health care politics.

The limited subject areas which make up psychiatric nursing newspaper articles also attest to the fact that many potential areas for news reports are being lost. Emphasis on more traditional inpatient roles of psychiatric nurses is especially noteworthy. Of particular concern is the low number of articles that reveal the psychiatric nurse in independent, autonomous care-giving activities, despite the fact that psychiatric nurses were historically among the first nurses to move into such roles. Unfortunately, other mental health professionals—psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers—appear to be getting most of the credit for positive health care outcomes in the care of people with emotional and life adjustment problems.

There are several reasons why nurses, in general, and psychiatric nurses, specifically, are so under-represented in newspapers. One key factor is the imbalance of power in the mental health delivery system. Apparently, psychiatric nurses are considered by the gatekeepers of the news media to be the least powerful and the least influential of all the mental health care professionals. Particularly psychiatrists, but also clinical psychologists, and to some extent even psychiatric social workers, are the providers of public repute and are featured by

the news media most often and sought out for expert opinions about psychologic and psychiatric issues.

Psychiatric nurses, on the other hand, are less apt to actively seek out news coverage for themselves than the other mental health care professionals for a variety of reasons. Since nursing is still 96% female dominated, the strong sex role socialization of females, which has traditionally placed a high valuation on modesty, is partly to blame. Furthermore, psychiatric nurses have failed to recognize that they have a social responsibility to increase the public's information about the role they play in mental health care. It goes without saying that the American public requires the services of psychiatric nurses. Yet, without information about what they do, what their accomplishments are, what impact they have on client welfare, and even the roadblocks they must surmount to practice effectively, the public and policy makers cannot make realistic-based judgments. Psychiatric nurses have ignored the fact that public support and visibility is necessary for their growth, and perhaps even their survival. But they have also failed to stress the fact that without access to psychiatric nursing services, the general welfare of the nation would indeed be much more disadvantaged than psychiatric nurses themselves.

Still another possible reason for the under-representation of psychiatric nursing news is fear. Perhaps psychiatric nurses fear that the news media is a Pandora's box which they do not know how to control. Because of this fear, many psychiatric nurses shun publicity and have an aversion to providing the press with information. Consequently, the result is an elaborate system for controlling the psychiatric nursing information that does reach the press. To some extent this news-phobia is the result of a professional socialization which teaches nurses that to talk to the press or public about any aspect of their work is unethical. Psychiatric nurses are particularly sensitive about the need to maintain patient confidentiality yet still let the public have access to information about their work.

Analysis of annual trends in the depiction of psychiatric nursing in newspapers shows an increase in the actual number of psychiatric nursing articles in that there were about twice as many in 1980 and 1981 than there were in 1978 and 1979. But, owing to overall increases in the number of all nursing ar-

ticles, the proportion of psychiatric nursing articles has diminished. On the positive side, psychiatric nursing articles are appearing more often both in frequently published newspapers and on page one. These articles also mention the advantages of nurse providers to a greater extent each year. On the negative side, newspaper depictions of progressive clinical roles of psychiatric nurses are declining as are stories about administrative and scholarly activities of psychiatric nurses. The press also shows relationships between psychiatric nurses and patients, other nurses, physicians, and health care and educational organizations as becoming more negative. Furthermore, press reports of power-seeking behavior of psychiatric nurses are declining, as are the numbers of psychiatric nurses with graduate preparation. Thus, for every trend in the positive direction, there is an opposing trend in a negative direction, which affects the image of the psychiatric nurse.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

There is no doubt that the news channels between psychiatric nurses and the public need to be improved in the future if the public is to understand psychiatric nurses. What is required are systematic grassroots campaigns in cities and towns all across the country to improve both the quantity and quality of information about psychiatric nursing; campaigns that would yield hundreds of articles every month, such as this recent one from the *Providence Journal* entitled "Psychiatric Nurses Get New Respect":

"You're a psychiatric nurse! What's that?"

The question is familiar to those in the profession, as is another one they often hear from their peers in medical-surgical specialties: "Don't you miss real nursing?"

Such questions once put psychiatric nurses on the defensive—but no longer. The more than 300 psychiatric nurses in the area are enjoying a new pride in their specialty....

Boundaries between physicians and nurses are coming down faster in mental health than in other medical fields, says Pat Gavin, associate director of nurses at Butler Hospital....

For example, Peter Mastrati, a psychologist...is "very excited" about the total involvement of nurses in the IMH program. "They are more than a link between doctor and patient. They

are real participants in what is truly holistic treatment because they straddle the medical and psychological. They are breaking down the traditional barrier that says treatment is solely the responsibility of the doctor," he says.

Diana Pearson, who has a master's degree in psychiatric nursing from the University of Rhode Island, is one of two clinical nurse specialists assigned to establish programming around the clock for long-term patients (Cole, 1983).

By giving attention to certain people, their acts, and various issues, the news media confers status. This status-conferral function serves to legitimize the actions and opinions of those who receive favorable publicity.

Newspapers provide timely and important facts which have consequences for the daily lives of all Americans. The news media, however, is more than an information conveyor; it also offers an evaluation of events, placing them in perspective. The press further serves as an instrument of public persuasion, largely by setting the public agenda which are those issues and topics in the forefront of public attention and concern. In other words, the public gives greater salience to those topics, issues, and attributes emphasized by the news media. These agenda orderings are adopted as personal priorities by citizens (MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; McCombs and Stone, 1975; Bogart, 1981).

The first step involved in the process of improving the quality of new media information about psychiatric nursing is getting organized. Psychiatric nurses need to form committees that will take leadership at the local level and apply pressure to change the status quo. It should always be remembered that a community is only as progressive as the news media serving it, and the media is only as good as the community demands. The news media seldom leads. It follows. It has to be pushed.

To work effectively with the news media, area newspapers must first be identified through the process of developing a comprehensive community-wide press list, including weekly shoppers, organization newsletters, etc. In this country, there are some 1,710 daily newspapers with a circulation of 62.4 million, and 7,626 weekly newspapers with a circulation of more than 44 million. These publications need to be reviewed in light of the desired goals of psychiatric nurses as well as the au-

diences these newspapers reach, asking such questions as: "Which newspapers on the list reach the desired audience(s)?" "What geographic range does each of these papers cover?" "What is their circulation?" "Who runs the paper?" "What is the editorial slant and what stands have they taken?" "Is there anyone who might facilitate access to any of these newspapers?"

Personal contacts are important since they allow psychiatric nurses to be distinguished from other groups. Discussing the issues with reporters and editors personally will, at the minimum, familiarize them with the salient issues of psychiatric nursing, but it may also serve to gain their support, and it will definitely increase the likelihood of their publicizing psychiatric nursing issues that are brought to their attention. If a sense of confidence in psychiatric nurses' fairmindedness and reliability is achieved, newspaper representatives may begin to turn to these nurses for statements regarding current mental health issues.

It is important to develop the necessary skills needed to identify what is considered newsworthy and has the best chance of publication. Newspapers deal with events that are new, different, dramatic, or unexpected. Local papers are interested in events that are close to home, news that is timely, and events that are out of the ordinary either in the sense that they do not happen all the time or are not part of the lives of ordinary persons. Since newspapers work in the public interest, psychiatric nurses will be most successful in gaining news attention if they isolate issues in a way that will underline the positive social and health care good and help attract a sympathetic public.

The next step is to facilitate news reporting about psychiatric nursing through press releases, letters to the editor, regular columns, and calendar listings. The main source of information for newspapers are press releases, and they should be used liberally, sending them out to every appropriate newspaper on the press list. A press release should be brief, no more than two pages double-spaced, and written in the "inverted pyramid" news form (that is, the most important items in the first two 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).

Letters to the editor, which have, unfortunately, been infrequently utilized by nurses, are among the

most effective and visible means of getting a message to the public. The letter page is the most accessible spot in a paper and is free of charge. Equally important, letters to the editor are seen by both the reading audience and the newspaper staff as a gauge of public sentiment. They are "the voice of the people," and a newspaper might even evaluate its position or non-position on the basis of a larger letter-to-the-editor campaign. A network of psychiatric nurses that can be counted on to write letters to the editor when needed is invaluable.

Smaller weekly newspapers, as well as some organization newsletters, frequently run columns that psychiatric nurses may have the opportunity to generate. Psychiatric nurses are in an excellent position to offer mental health information to the public through regular columns. This activity does require a commitment to write the installments regularly, but it is a challenging and rewarding activity. Finally, most newspapers have a calendar listing of upcoming events in the area and by listing your committee's or organization's events in the calendar, additional exposure to public attention is achieved.

Newspapers are windows on the world. Through them, Americans learn what they want to know, need to know, or should know, about issues and groups such as psychiatric nurses. But the view depends on whether the window is large or small, has many panes or few, is clear or opaque, or faces the street or the back yard. The challenge for psychiatric nurses is to ensure maximum public access to quality information about themselves—their services, their accomplishments, and their problems—by endeavoring to make this window as large and as clear as possible.

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