

# REFLECTIONS ON A TELEVISION IMAGE



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*Editor's Note: Though the authors primarily address the content of The Nurses, which was televised from 1962-1965, CBS-TV has recently launched a six-episode series of Nurse. Although the authors provide an in-depth analysis of the television image of nurses in an older dramatic series, the readers are offered tools to use in the assessment of a popular series being televised today.*

*In the December 1980 issue, Nursing and Health Care ran a story on the National League for Nursing's involvement as consultant on the Nurse series.*

The CBS television network has recently introduced a dramatic series about nurses. The new show, *Nurse*, stars Michael Learned in the role that she created in a made-for-TV movie of the same name, shown in the spring of 1980. Ultimately, the new series will be judged by its ability to attract a sufficiently large audience to guarantee its survival. Should *Nurse* do well in the ratings war (the pilot was quite successful) and win a solid place in the weekly programming schedule, it will be in a strong position to influence the way in which the American public of the 1980s perceives the nursing profession. [1,2] Registered nurses interested in the promotion of positive and realistic portrayals of contemporary nurses on television would do well to turn a critical eye toward *Nurse*.

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Criteria for judging the new series do exist. In the entire history of television programming, only one other prime-time, national network series focused primarily on nursing: *The Nurses* (CBS, 1962-1965). The image of nursing found in this series proved to be the strongest and most positive image in any series to feature nurses as regular characters. A retrospective examination of what elements contributed to the positive image of the nursing profession in *The Nurses* and an explanation of the series' unfortunate fate can prepare viewers, not only to evaluate the new series, *Nurse*, intelligently, but also to systematically campaign for any necessary improvements.

This analysis is one part of a larger investigation of the image of nursing on television over the past 30 years. With a 20 percent sample of prime-time series with nurse characters, a research method of content analysis was used. Coding was done on research instruments developed and tested for the study. Dominant impressions of nursing, behavioral traits, and primary values of nurse characters, nursing activities, and other key variables reflective of the nurse image were analyzed. Three tools were developed, tested, and utilized in coding the content of television programs: a unit analysis tool, a nurse character tool, and a physician character tool. Coders underwent standardized training procedures and achieved an intra-rater reliability of 88.4 percent and an inter-rater reliability of 90.2 percent. Measures of instrument content and convergent validity were made.

*The Nurses* premiered in fall of 1962 as CBS' answer

to *Ben Casey* (ABC) and *Dr. Kildare* (NBC). Those old enough may recall the craze of the early 1960s, when teen-aged girls wore Ben Casey smocks and the public devoured medical programming. By and large, the image of nursing did not prosper in hospital dramas — the gallant, life-saving activities of the handsome, young physician-heroes left little room for the development of nurse characters. *The Nurses*, not surprisingly, did offer the viewing public an opportunity to witness nurses at work without the domineering presence of physician characters — at least during the first two seasons of the series' life. *The Nurses*, in keeping with the proven format of health care shows, used the experienced counsellor/idealistic neophyte relationship as its fulcrum.

## Main Characters

During its first two seasons, *The Nurses* followed the personal and professional lives of two nurse characters in Alden General Hospital in New York City: head nurse Liz Thorpe and nursing student Gail Lucas. Liz's experience, wisdom, and realistic view of human nature often corrected the high-minded, idealistic, frequently misguided enthusiasms of her protégé, Gail.

The character of Liz Thorpe, beautifully developed by actress Shirl Conway, provided the most consistent and positive image of all the nurse characters shown during the life of the series. Indeed, Liz Thorpe served as the linchpin of Alden General's nursing staff. In the days before "women's lib," Liz represented the best in emancipated womanhood: Feminine and compassionate, she brought a sense of authority, discipline, and professional excellence to nursing. The universal admiration for Liz by patients, physicians, and other nurses emphasized the fact that here, indeed, was the ideal nurse. Her appearance, background, and personality contributed to her appeal as a woman and protagonist of the series.

Liz's personality revealed a complex woman. She often appeared to be the eternal mother hen, clucking over the trials of young nurses and doctors. "Ma Thorpe" was forever maternally guiding Gail through the crises of youth and inexperience. The patients most in need of extra-loving care received Liz's tenderest ministrations. However, Liz's sharp tongue and acerbic wit kept her from becoming too saccharine. She did not suffer fools gladly and often lost her temper with the inefficient or the unwelcome.

Liz's main contribution to the image of nursing was her role as finder of compromises and solutions and arbitrator of disputed issues. She represented the "golden mean" — the right balance between compassion and objectivity; between involvement and distance; between idealism and pragmatism. While others about her lost their heads, she pursued the middle course — usually. Whenever she did err, it was always on the side



of too much compassion, too much generosity, or too much involvement.

The series' other leading nurse character, Gail Lucas, played by Zina Bethune, had less character depth. The 18-year-old nursing student served as the show's official idealist who thought with her heart and acted on her generous impulses. Excused by her lack of experience and redeemed by good intentions, Gail blundered her way through two years as a student at Alden's hospital school of nursing and then became a staff nurse. In her starched pinafore and cap, she looked the part of the naive ingenue — big blue eyes, long blonde hair (pinned primly under her cap), and open facial expression.

Young and pretty, Gail exuded girlishness, immaturity, and innocence; the character acquired a one-dimensional quality that bothered many critics and the actress herself, who once complained that Gail had no background.

Professional nursing groups and individual nurses found Gail the most disconcerting aspect of the series. [3] As a student she made too many blunders to have been tolerated in a real hospital, and she rarely was seen receiving clinical instruction. At most, she learned from mistakes and listened to Liz's instruction. Gail showed poor judgment, acting in ways that second- and third-year nursing students would not. For example, in one episode, Gail — identifying a patient by name — read from the patient's chart in obvious earshot of non-professionals. Regardless of the seriousness of her errors, Gail emerged at the end of each show in full possession of the viewer's sympathy (although cynical viewers may have wished her fired at times), awarded because Gail was loyal to her ideals, however mistaken they may have been.

Gail's virtues, aside from her compassion and con-

cern for others, stemmed from her stubborn insistence that truth and justice would win the day. For example, she refused to believe that she would be dismissed from nursing school because of her unprofessional handling of a particular case. After all, she said, the real issue was whether or not a mother and father were abusing their son. There was a *deus ex machina* quality to Gail's predicaments — just in the nick of time, someone or something would happen to establish her veracity or at least save her from herself. Unlike Liz Thorpe, Gail often turned to others for help, comfort, or counselling — usually to Liz.

### Supporting Cast

Recurring characters on *The Nurses* included staff nurses Verna Ayres (Hilda Simms) and nursing student Kelly (Joanna Miles): These and other Alden General staff nurses who appeared in minor roles showed neither the virtuosity of Liz nor the exaggerated idealism of Gail. They appeared to be ordinary people, competent and happy in their work, but untroubled by the larger issues of life.

Verna Ayres was an attractive black nurse in her 30s who often played confidante to Liz. Occasionally, Verna took action on her own, as when she tried to persuade a married doctor to protect Liz's reputation by leaving her alone. The nursing students who shared Gail's work appeared to be happy, hard-working young women who gave little thought to the larger meaning of their careers; they seldom suffered the introspective pangs that Gail Lucas did.

In the show's efforts to explore various aspects of the human condition, the nurse characters were used not only to portray individuals but often to convey a message, not so much about nursing as about humanity in general. Consequently, many of the nurses featured displayed negative qualities or emotional disturbances. But each episode resolved the matter in such a way as to indicate that the situation was unusual in the nursing field or at least not tolerated by nursing professionals.

The non-nurse support staff provided other themes for the episodes. Romantic interest and masculine viewpoints came from young intern Ned Lowry (Stephen Brooke) and Liz's beau Dr. Anson Kiley (Edward Binns), both only semi-regular characters. The patients and staff of Alden General revealed the racial and occupational mix found in a large metropolitan area: Chinese and Pakistani doctors, black nurses and physicians, Puerto Ricans, writers, teamsters, stevedores, students, social workers, salesmen, and electricians. Although the series reflected the technical advice received from consulting nurses, the dramatic conflict emphasized moral and ethical choices rather than urgent, life-saving interventions. The series remained rather vague about specializations and staff

assignments. For example, the floor that Liz Thorpe supervised housed a combination of pediatric, medical, and surgical patients. Dr. Kiley never declared a specialty. By keeping these details vague, the writers could introduce the regular cast into almost any type of health care situation.

### Thematic Orientation

It was during the series' first two seasons that the nursing profession received its closest scrutiny. Although nurse characters dominated the action during the first two years, the writers did not focus solely on nursing *per se*. More often than not, stories concerned a moral or ethical issue that transcended any single profession. The stories treated racism, capital punishment, child abuse, abortion, alcoholism, death and dying, and aging, as well as a few light-hearted topics with a comic touch.

Nurse characters often became embroiled in a moral conflict that stemmed from incongruities between personal background or preferences and the responsibilities of the nursing profession. For example, a young, black nurse trying to efface ties with her ghetto background encountered professional difficulties with a black patient who challenged her motives. In another episode, an ex-alcoholic nurse jeopardized her career trying to help an alcoholic patient retain custody of her child. The nurses presented seemed in constant search of the right proportion of sympathy and concern with the right proportion of distance and objectivity. Gail Lucas was especially prone to mixing her personal feelings into professional matters, only to be straightened out by Liz Thorpe.

Thematically, the show pursued a rather consistent path as writers sought to surprise or shock viewers out of making automatic judgments about the guilt or innocence of characters based on deceptive first impressions. The hallmark of the series was a commitment to realism and social concerns. Although the resolution of the conflicts presented did not always satisfy a viewer's desire for a neat ending, in retrospect, the overall dramatic quality of *The Nurses* has not been matched in recent years by many 60-minute dramatic series' and certainly not by the 1970s rash of medical-oriented shows, of which *Medical Center* and *Marcus Welby M.D.* were the most successful.

The value of *The Nurses*, however, surpasses the quality of its production in that, above and beyond the good writing, acting, and directing of the show, the series presented to the American public a rare insight into the organization, standards, and responsibilities of the nursing profession. In order to understand what made *The Nurses* such a good nursing drama, it is necessary to analyze several components of the series and compare it, broadly, to the way that other hospital dramas have treated nurses and nursing.



## Comparison of *The Nurses* To Analogous Hospital Dramas

Our research into the way in which nurses have been portrayed on television during the past 30 years has generated a large number of indices by which to evaluate these portrayals. When compared to analogous hospital dramas featuring physician characters in leading roles, *The Nurses* emerges as the strongest and most positive series ever to feature nurses in regular roles. [4] The routine treatment of nurse characters in most hospital dramas has been appalling. Often, nurses appear only as background scenery, fetching trays and pushing wheelchairs. When nurses do come into contact with physicians and patients, frequently the nurses are shown to be powerless, problem-prone women who cannot solve their own personal problems, much less contribute to the welfare of others.

In physician-dominated hospital dramas, it would appear to the viewer that nurses work under the direct supervision of physicians, who appear to hold the sole responsibility for hiring, firing, promoting, counselling, and otherwise intervening in nursing matters. Nurse characters are judged by how well they serve a doctor. Joe Gannon of *Medical Center* made explicit his opinion that nurses existed for the sole purpose of executing the physician's orders. Nurses sit or stand helplessly by the bedsides of patients, observing doctors do the important tasks of patient care. Furthermore, in most hospital-based dramas, physician characters provide the all-important emotional support for their patients, sitting by comatose patients for hours waiting for some response or intervening in family difficulties trying to help a patient. The bulk of television nursing activity occurs behind the nurse's station, where legions of nameless nurses answer phones, pass messages to doctors, and make inscrutable notations in files and on cards.

On *The Nurses*, a totally different view of the profession was given. Many, many episodes pointed to the existence of professional nursing standards, which students strove to reach or by which errant nurses were found wanting. These nursing standards existed independent of any service to a physician. The nurses appeared to be responsible for their own discipline and for the defense of their rights and privileges. Nurses in need of counselling or reprimands usually received them from another nurse character, either a supervisor or instructor. When mistreated by physicians or patients, the nursing administrative support system intervened to protect the nurse from abuse. Nurses were problem solvers in this series rather than helpless amateurs who waited for a physician to arrive on the scene and settle matters. They helped each other with both personal and professional difficulties, and, on several occasions, nurse characters had the audacity to help and to

counsel problem-prone physicians!

Nurses seemed eager to advance their profession. In addition to students studying and working to learn, older staff nurses often were shown to learn from experience or to be involved in improving nursing care and standards. The classic virtues associated with nursing — compassion, patience, self-sacrifice — were demonstrated in good quantity, but not to the exclusion of other, less romantic, qualities such as intelligence, objectivity, and articulate speech. [5]

## Impact on Patient Welfare

These general observations were supported by quantitative analysis. We compared *The Nurses* with other hospital dramas on certain indices of professional activity and personality traits. As seen in Figure 1, there was a significant difference in the positive impact on patient welfare between nurse characters in *The Nurses* and in other hospital dramas. Nurse characters on the former took a strong interest in the physical and emotional welfare of their patients and often went beyond the limits of professional obligation to provide special atten-

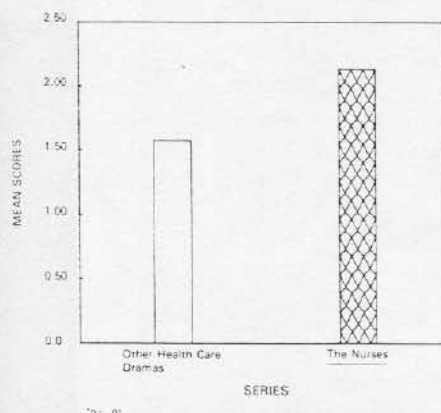


Figure 1. Extent of positive impact on patient welfare: comparison between nurse characters on *The Nurses* versus other health care television dramas\*.

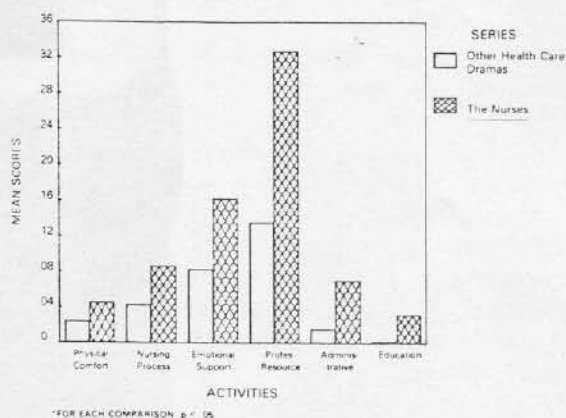


Figure 2. Comparison of nursing activities of nurse characters on *The Nurses* versus other health care television dramas\*.

tion and help for individuals. The reason for the strength of the differences between *The Nurses* and other hospital dramas in the area of patient welfare can be seen in the comparison of nursing activities shown in Figure 2.

### Inventory of Nursing Activities

The differences appeared significant in all of the areas of nursing activity represented in Figure 2, with *The Nurses* consistently demonstrating more instances of nurse characters involved in professional activities. The provision of services by nurses for a patient's physical comfort — bathing, massaging, feeding, fluffing pillows — occurred more than twice as frequently in *The Nurses*. Often, however, these important but less skilled tasks were performed by nursing students — a clear recognition of a division of authority and responsibility within the nursing staff. Thus, Gail Lucas, more often than Liz Thorpe, would be shown feeding her patients, making their beds, or bathing them. In other types of nursing activities, nurses were involved in work requiring higher levels of intelligence and responsibility than was normally assigned to nurses in other television hospital dramas.

The category of "nursing process" included all actions requiring a nurse to translate a patient's needs into a nursing intervention. When nurses were portrayed referring a patient to another health care provider or community service agency, making rounds, assessing a patient's health problem, and the like, they were coded as having demonstrated a nursing process activity.

Only *The Nurses* showed the nursing staff making rounds on a regular basis, usually at a change of shift — indicating to the viewer that the nurses maintained a constant, 24-hour-a-day evaluation of their patients and made sure that each new shift of nurses would be apprised of each patient's condition. When nurses made rounds with doctors, often a nurse would make an observation to a physician, rather than standing mute (as so often occurs in physician-dominated hospital dramas).

The category of emotional support is especially important in realizing the differences between *The Nurses* and analogous hospital dramas. Many viewers recall how assiduous Marcus Welby, Joe Gannon, Jim Kildare, and Ben Casey were in sustaining their patients' good spirits and emotional equanimity. These good doctors would spend hours solving the personal problems of their patients and sitting at bedsides waiting for patients to recover. In *The Nurses*, staff nurses provided this emotional support. Because so much hospital drama rests upon the resolution of emotional difficulties, the provider of emotional support necessarily appears all-important in a patient's recovery.

Liz spent every spare minute at the bedside of a young man dying of aplastic anemia; she monitored the

ebb and flow of family and friends visiting her patients; she encouraged another nurse to help a suicidal patient to recover from his despondence; often, she would find ways in which her patients could help each other, as when she engineered a blind priest into helping a blind Jewish boy prepare for his Bar Mitzvah. Moreover, the nurses did not treat all of their patients alike. They determined that some needed a gentle, tender approach, while others profited more from a more impersonal, businesslike manner.

The most glaring distinction between nurses on *The Nurses* and those on other hospital dramas occurred in the field of professional relationships, categorized as "professional resource," and composed of both personal and professional interactions between nurses and other health care providers — doctors in particular. As noted previously, in most hospital dramas, physicians rarely consult or even listen to a nurse's opinion about a patient's condition, and physicians never turn to nurses for help with a personal problem. On the other hand, physicians often do provide emotional support to distressed nurses, who never seem to have any friends among the nursing staff. In *The Nurses*, however, not only were nurse characters shown to enjoy friendship and mutual support within the nursing staff, they also offered suggestions to physicians in a collaborative approach.

The relationships among the nurses in the series almost always expressed friendship, mutual respect, and loyalty to each other, the most important friendship existing between Liz Thorpe and Gail Lucas. But this friendship did not stand on an equal footing, since Gail clearly needed Liz's help and guidance more than Liz needed Gail's dubious contributions. The viewer suspected that Liz saw something of her own girlish idealism and enthusiasm in Gail; the older nurse never failed to save Gail from herself or from other hostile forces. Nearly every episode showed motherly Liz leading Gail from a new debacle, arm around the student's waist, comforting her with words of wisdom. At times, nurses acted as protectors of the doctors as well. In "The Imperfect Prodigy," Liz was the only champion for a brilliant but rude resident who faced expulsion. Gail also defended Dr. Lillian — in one of the two episodes featuring female physicians — who faced great hostility from a male colleague.

Respect and friendship between nurses and physicians were evident, but these relationships remained rather formal. Except for the veteran Liz, the nurses addressed physicians as "Doctor," while the doctors, in turn, addressed the nurses and students as "Miss" or "Mrs." Orders were given and taken in a mutually respectful manner; often a physician complimented a nurse or student if her handling of a given situation merited it. And physicians thanked nurses for their help, even on such minor tasks as passing a tongue blade or fetching a piece of equipment. Physicians were



courteous and listened to the nurses' assessments.

Another category related to "professional resource" monitored the instances of nurses providing administrative structure for other nurses — supervision, discipline, dismissal, evaluation, promotion — and demonstrating authority over the activities of aides and orderlies. On *The Nurses*, the existence of a nursing administration appeared much more evident than in other health care series, as dramatically seen in Figure 3. The viewer became aware of nurses and nursing services as distinct and separate from doctors and medical services. Almost half of all instances of nurses providing administrative services in television hospital dramas between 1950 and 1980 appeared on *The Nurses* between 1962 and 1964.

Moreover, in physician-dominated hospital dramas, doctors exercised control over every aspect of the nursing staff. No hint of a hierarchical arrangement of the nursing staff was given — all nurses were equal, and there was limited evidence of less skilled employees. Alden General Hospital, on the other hand, clearly had a structure of nursing administration that bore responsibility for the control of both staff nurses and the hospital's nursing school. On only two occasions was a nurse disciplined directly by hospital administrators, and even then, nurses intervened to assist the nurse in question. Usually, however, nurses handled nursing problems. For example, in "The Barbara Bowers Story," nursing administrators closely watched a troublesome student, dismissed her from school, and eventually allowed her to return.

Besides the administrative structure, the staff nurses clearly stood on a higher professional plane than the orderlies and nurses' aides also seen in *The Nurses*. With regard to patient care, the nurse gave the orders to the support staff; there was no question of the head nurse's authority on her unit. Liz Thorpe ran her unit efficiently; she arranged staffing schedules and monitored the work of her nurses, while addressing any problems

that arose. She also served as supervisor and informal clinical instructor for the nursing students on her floor.

The dimensions of nursing education are rarely explored on any hospital drama. Candy stripers and nursing students occasionally landed in the paternal nets of Joe Gannon, Ben Casey, or Marcus Welby, but viewers were never brought to any understanding of the nature of the nursing education. In *Medical Center*, set in a university hospital, nursing students appeared to be taught by physicians and "trained" in a manner reminiscent of a diploma school rather than a university. Furthermore, doctors took charge of handling nursing school matters.

Alden General Hospital ran a three-year diploma school program for nurses. As seen in Figure 2, *The Nurses* far surpassed other health care dramas in the depiction of nursing education activities. Few scenes of classroom instruction were shown, but often nursing students appeared carrying books, at least suggesting to the viewer that nurses learned by theoretical means as well as by practical experience. Clinical instruction on *The Nurse* was rarely shown in a formal setting, but dozens of instances of staff nurses correcting nursing students did occur. *The Nurses*, produced in the early

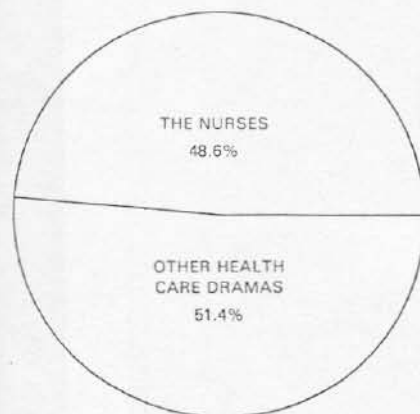


Figure 3. Proportion of administrative actions carried out by nurse characters in *The Nurses* versus other health care television dramas.

1960s, reflected traditional ways of educating registered nurses; there was never any mention made of nurses who possessed a baccalaureate education. (It will be interesting to see if the new series, *Nurse*, identifies the diversity of educational preparation for nursing.)

### Personal Attributes of Nurse Characters

Beyond the actual activities in which nurses engaged on *The Nurses*, the producers and writers of the series presented nurse characters as strong, intelligent, ambitious women, far removed from the passive, powerless, and intellectually limited nurse characters seen in most hospital dramas. As seen in Figure 4, nurse



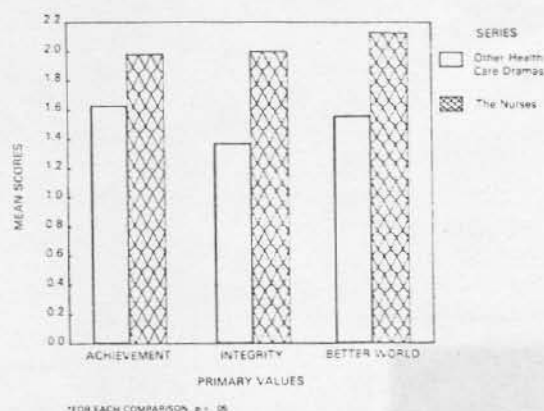


Figure 4. Comparison of primary values of nurse characters on *The Nurses* versus other health care television dramas\*

characters in *The Nurses* expressed primarily values of achievement, integrity, and desire for a better world far more often than in most health care dramas. In the other dramas, physician characters were associated with these values much more often than nurse characters. The nurse characters stood for the status quo; they seemed to revel in the application of rules and regulations, even when breaking a rule might achieve a more important goal and significantly improve the welfare of another. These nurses rarely contradicted doctors, even when the doctors seemed to be in the wrong.

On *The Nurses*, nurse characters sought to live up to their values and goals through their own actions, not merely help a physician live up to his values. Liz Thorpe personified integrity for the series. Episode after episode, the viewer witnessed her insistence upon high standards of professional service from both her subordinates and herself.

Intelligence was another attribute characteristic of the nurses in the series. Liz Thorpe talked of books, poetry, and travel; her speech was graceful and articulate. Another nurse on the program once immersed herself in the scientific literature on an experimental drug. Although conclusions she formed caused her to be dismissed for disobeying a doctor's order, she maintained a posture of honesty, integrity, and altruism — she claimed she would have done the same thing again.

While there were indications of intellectual interests, a great number of disturbed and troubled nurses did appear on *The Nurses*. This fact angered members of the nursing profession. [6] At various times, Liz Thorpe encountered sadistic, ex-Nazi, alcoholic, drug-addicted, bigoted, and unmarried pregnant nurses. Despite this formidable list of undesirables, the series, for the most part, carefully maintained the positive image of the profession by emphasizing how aberrant these women were and, most importantly, how the nursing profession managed to identify and weed out undesirable peo-

ple from the practice of nursing. These aberrant nurse characters also turned up on physician-oriented hospital shows, but without the presence of other, admirable nurses to balance the presentation.

In sum, *The Nurses'* greatest contribution to the image of nursing was its consistent presentation of nursing as an autonomous profession that generated its own standards and conducted its own affairs. Furthermore, the standards and values associated with nursing equalled those associated with the medical profession. The women who worked as nurses in this series actively sought solutions for both personal and professional difficulties.

Of course, there were weaknesses in the series, perhaps exaggerated now by the passing of time. The diploma school environment of *The Nurses* still emphasized practical experience more than theoretical instruction. Gail Lucas was oftentimes unbelievable in her innocence and naiveté and her mistakes of judgment might not be tolerated in real life. So many aberrant, troubled nursing characters appearing in a single hospital, let alone a single ward, did strain credibility. But when compared to analogous health care dramas, *The Nurses* remains the single, bright star of television programming with regard to the presentation of a strong and positive image of the profession.

## Conclusion

In 1964, in an attempt to improve ratings, the show was re-christened *The Doctors and the Nurses* and, in effect, two male actors took over the leading roles, leaving Liz and Gail as important but secondary characters. In addition to casting innovations, the producers changed the tone of the series from an often thoughtful, discursive examination of a single issue to a more action-oriented format, with many more instances of violence, crime, and life-saving heroics featured. The network really wanted a medical show more in keeping with the enormously popular *Ben Casey* and *Dr. Kildare*, and sacrificed an original, quality drama about women and nursing to this end. This format revision did not improve the ratings significantly, and the series was cancelled at the end of the 1964-65 season.

Nurses throughout the country probably can do very little to assure the success of the new series, *Nurse*. As with every other television program, it will prosper or perish according to the iron law of the Nielsen ratings. Should the series survive, however, the producers might be susceptible to influence from individual nurses and nursing organizations, if nurse response is widespread and constructive.

The retrospective analysis of *The Nurses* provides several key issues to look for in the new series and by which to judge the image of the nursing profession. Generally, nurse-viewers should be sensitive to philosophical and professional issues rather than to



technical accuracy. Whether or not a nurse character sets up an I.V. drip properly will have little impact upon the general viewer's perception of the nursing profession. The overall presentation of the nurse and her actions, on the other hand, will affect the way viewers see the profession as a whole. A brief checklist of things to consider in evaluating the program is as follows:

- Is there evidence of a nursing administrative structure in the hospital setting? That is, do nurses conduct their own personnel matters, such as hiring, firing, promoting, and disciplining?
- Are the nurse characters generally reflective of educated women? That is, do they appear to be articulate, well-read, perceptive? Is there a recognition of the variety of nurses' educational programs and of the role of advanced education for nurses?
- Are nurse characters problem solvers or do they take their problems to non-nurses, namely, to physicians?
- Do physicians and nurses interact in a collegial fashion about patient care in joint planning?
- Do nurse characters assert their rights and demand respect? Do they seek to advance themselves and their profession? Do they express altruistic, humanitarian values and act accordingly?
- Is there a professional nurse who serves as a consultant for the series? (Two registered nurses worked with the writing and production staff of *The Nurses*, one as advisor to the writers, inculcating in them sensitivity to the philosophy of nursing, the second on the set, advising the production crew on technical authenticity.)

The heritage of *The Nurses*, the past generation's singularly positive depiction of the profession, is an important one. Almost always, nurses have not been deemed important enough to hold the major roles in health care dramas. Instead, numerous prime-time series' featured male physicians as the principal characters and superheroes. Herbert Brodtkin, the producer of *The Nurses*, was fully cognizant of the fact that

writers, directors, and actors create a powerful point of view that shapes public images and ideas about nurses and their roles in health care. [7] Building on this constructive tradition, the creators of the nurse dramas of the 1980s have it in their power to add to or avoid the overwhelmingly negative stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals of nurses that have characterized most television programming.

## Footnotes and References

1. *Variety*, September 17, 1980, p. 58, identifies only six out of 291 made-for-TV movies doing better in the Nielsen ratings: *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones* (2 parts); *Kenny Rogers As The Gambler*; *Scruples* (2 parts); *Carnival of Thrills*; *Tenspeed and Brown Shoe*; and *Aunt Mary, Nurse*, shown on April 9, earned a Nielsen rating of 24.3 and garnered a 39 audience share.
2. An introduction to research on the effect of television may be found in: G. Comstock, M. Fisher, *Television and Human Behavior: A Guide to the Pertinent Scientific Literature* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1975); G. Comstock, F. G. Christen, M. L. Fisher, R. C. Quarles, W. D. Richards, *Television and Human Behavior: The Key Studies* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1975); and G. Comstock, S. Chaffee, N. Katzman, M. McCombs, D. Roberts, *Television and Human Behavior* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).  
Examples of studies on the portrayal of women and minorities on television are: M. L. Long, R. J. Simon, "The roles and statuses of women and children on family TV programs," *Journalism Quarterly* (1974) 51:107-10; M. M. Miller, B. Reeves, "Dramatic TV content and children's sex-role stereotypes," *Journal of Broadcasting* (1976) 20:35-50; H. C. Northcott, J. F. Seggar, J. L. Hinton, "Trends in TV portrayal of blacks and women," *Journalism Quarterly* (1975) 52:741-44; C. G. O'Kelly, L. E. Bloomquist, "Women and blacks on TV," *Journal of Communications* (1976) 26(4): 179-84; and G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, J. Benet, eds., *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (New York: Oxford, 1978).
3. Schorr, T., "Nursing's TV Image," *AJN*, Vol. 63:10, Oct. 1963, p. 120.
4. For the purposes of this article, *The Nurses* was compared to analogous health care dramas — series of a dramatic nature featuring physicians in leading roles. Excluded were situation comedies and action-adventure programs that featured nurses as regular characters. The series included such series as *Ben Casey* (ABC, 1961—1966); *The Bold Ones* (NBC, 1969—1973); *Doctor Hudson's Secret Journal* (syndicated, 1955); *Dr. Kildare* (NBC, 1961—1966); *Doctors Hospital* (NBC, 1975-1976); *The Interns* (CBS, 1970—1971); *Marcus Welby, M.D.* (ABC, 1969—1976); *Medic* (NBC, 1954—1956); *Medical Center* (CBS, 1969—1976); *Medical Story* (NBC, 1975—1976); *Rafferty* (CBS, 1977); *Trapper John, M.D.* (CBS, 1979—present); *Westside Medical* (ABC, 1977); and *Young Dr. Kildare* (syndicated, 1972).
5. All of these behavioral traits were found to be significantly (at the  $p < .05$ ) more in evidence in *The Nurses* as contrasted with other health care dramas.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
7. Efron, E., "Realist Faces Reality," *TV Guide*, Vol. 13:38, Sept. 18, 1965, p. 19-22.

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