

Nursing and the Media: A Mission for the Center for Nursing Advocacy

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When has our profession been portrayed accurately on TV, radio, or in print? Rarely. Instead, we're seen as female sex objects, handmaidens to physicians, or worse.

In a television shampoo commercial two years ago, a pretty blonde female nurse in crispy whites, short skirt and cleavage, left her heart-monitored male patient alone so she could have a "relationship" with her shampoo in the patient's shower.

In a November 2004 show Dr. Phil voiced his disapproval of a physician who was having an extramarital affair with a nurse. Dr. Phil said:

" . . . I've seen lots of cute little nurses go after doctors, because they're going to seduce and marry them a doctor, because that's their ticket out of having to work as a nurse."

In the show *ER*, which reaches millions of viewers worldwide, nurses are hired and fired by physicians. It frequently credits physicians for the work that *ER nurses* do in real life.

If the media isn't mischaracterizing us, then it simply ignores us on important issues such as: healthcare errors, adverse drug reactions; nosocomial infections; stem cell research; caps on malpractice lawsuits—and so many others. On the front lines we understand the breakdowns that cause healthcare errors. We see how meds affect our patients. We know the effects of nosocomial infections and how to prevent them. Firsthand, we help manage patients through the devastation of Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and other conditions that can be potentially alleviated by stem cell research. And we have an idea about why patients sue and what it would take to minimize lawsuits.

So why does the media rarely question nurses about healthcare topics?

According to Gallup polls, public trust for nurses ranks top. But "trust" is not "respect." I believe this lack of respect is deeply rooted in societal beliefs and misconceptions about what we do. And the media

consistently fuels these misconceptions.

At first, the silly ways I saw nurses portrayed on TV didn't bother me: I figured it wasn't personal. But as I travel across the U.S. fulfilling short-term contracts in hospitals with insufficient numbers of nurses, I see the bigger picture of this ill-informed media: discharged newborns return to pediatric wards with RSV; hospitalized patients acquire MRSA; patients suffer needless adverse reactions to medications. The resulting anguish to so many of these and other cases is due in large part to a breakdown in nurse teaching.

So are nurses not teaching? Or are patients ignoring us? Maybe it's a combination of both. Maybe the nurse didn't have time to teach because he or she was overworked. And maybe the overwork is due to a shortage of nurses caused in part by the media's portrayal of us. After all, would you want your daughter, son, husband, or wife to be a nurse only to be looked upon by friends and relatives as we're portrayed in the media? Or perhaps the media has inadvertently conditioned the public not to take us seriously.

I wanted to do something about it so I became a member of the *Center for Nursing Advocacy*, a nonprofit organization. Through their website, www.nursingadvocacy.org, nurses are able to report what they see and hear in the media about our profession. The Center researches the media coverage then posts its findings on their website. The Center acknowledges and compliments those that treat our profession fairly and accurately. However, typical coverage about the nursing profession is outright wrong. Therefore, the Center informs and educates the media about the true nature of what nurses do and why it is crucial to portray us accurately.

It's important to get involved in changing the media's portrayal of nurses because each time our image is harmed our nation's healthcare is harmed. As the largest sector of healthcare and because of the various experiences we possess, our profession is in a position to help save our nation's healthcare. We have unique and special skills and insights to offer the public. We have a way of incorporating body, mind, and spirit into health recovery

unlike any other healthcare discipline. We understand that preventive medicine is better than reactive medicine; that quality of life matters.

But to communicate our messages we need bold, bright, compassionate people to thirst to be nurses. We need nurses who are not afraid to confront a physician about a bad judgment call; who can think creatively to find new ways to deliver our healthcare messages; and who can articulate the pros and cons about current healthcare issues to the public, politicians, and administrators. And perhaps most importantly we need the public to *hear* our messages.

But as long as the public only sees nurses through mass media stereotypes our messages will fall on deaf ears and our nation's healthcare will continue to crumble.

The *Center for Nursing Advocacy* has made some progress. For one, the shameful shampoo commercial was dropped. Also, after receiving numerous letters of protest from nurses, Dr. Phil attempted to make amends by expressing appreciation for our training, judgment, and hard work.

As for the show, *ER*, well, the Center continues to work on its producers. They have all but ignored our pleas to portray us accurately. Reliable research data indicates that public opinion of healthcare is greatly shaped by this show. Thus, nursing loses credibility each time the show portrays us as "doctor helpers" rather than patient advocates with our own licenses and our own specific role to healthcare separate from—but complimentary to—the role of physicians.

Through the Center's website any nurse can be well informed about what the media is up to; sign up for email alerts; get involved in letter-writing campaigns; participate in their discussion forum; and report media attention given to our profession.

By getting involved with this one-of-a-kind organization, we can help improve our public image. A better image is crucial to getting our nursing messages heard. And by conveying our messages to persons who respect our opinions, nurses have a better shot at improving our patients' health and our nation's wellness. And ultimately, isn't that why we're nurses?