

# Media Portrayals of Nurses:

The media no longer ask those who know something to share that knowledge with the public. Instead they ask those who know nothing to represent the ignorance of the public and, in so doing, to legitimate [sic] it.

~ Serge Daney (1944-1992), French film critic

We cannot deny that today's media has inestimable power in its ability to shape the public's image of issues, events, and people. In the past, I must admit (rather sheepishly) that I've taken the personal position that I just don't have the energy or time to take up a "one-woman stand" against media representations of nursing or other issues of concern to me. I've always been sensitive to our plight, as nurses, in being the target of mostly negative media portrayals of our discipline, but I've never really been motivated to do anything about it.

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Consider for a moment that the Internet, television, newspapers, and magazines are multibillion dollar U.S. industries. One need only consider the number of Americans who tune into popular television shows to realize that messages delivered through that medium reach millions of people at every socioeconomic level.

With millions of people watching each night, certainly

television has incredible potential to influence, educate, inform, and enlighten Americans. Therefore, it becomes imperative that professional nurses take a role in responding to inaccurate representations of nursing. Television has tremendous power to affect the public's perception of health care and its providers; in fact, this topic has been the focus of much research.

So how can one person effect change on a huge institution like the American media? Like many of you, I've devoted my life to the care of individuals and families who suffer from mental disorders and to the education of young professionals who will be the next generation of mental health care providers. I have witnessed severe mental illness at its most profoundly destructive level; I've seen the effect it can have on individuals and families; and I've been "in the trenches," helping individuals and their families through these devastating experiences, including disability and death. How can I just stand by silently and let uninformed pro-

ducers and writers portray my profession in a false manner? I have many questions about this, including, "Who should I direct my comments to?" and "How can one person make any headway in addressing this huge problem?"

I must admit it is part of my professional responsibility to find answers to these questions, and to become more active in addressing the portrayal of nurses in the media. Perhaps this is a developmental stage; as I become older and "wiser" as a person and a professional, the pressure of using my education and experience to affect greater-than-local critical issues has become more central in my professional life. Or perhaps I'm just becoming less tolerant of allowing those who are uneducated about nursing to convey inaccurate messages about nursing to the public. I'm not sure, but the end result is that I have been motivated into action.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO ME

Let me tell you the story that led up to my personal revelation, fueled by the weekly television drama, *House* (Fox TV). When I first saw the advertisements for this show, I was attracted to the premise of a health care provider (unfortunately, as usual, a physician) who is stymied by unusual and rare diseases that have

# What We Can Do

unique and bizarre clinical symptoms. Having worked as a psychiatric consultation-liaison nurse for many years, I was drawn to the idea of figuring out the puzzle presented by these scenarios and was eager to try to unravel each mystery along with the cast of characters. In fact, during the first few shows I watched, I was frequently able to hypothesize correctly about some of these presentations. I took pleasure in the mental challenge posed during each weekly episode and found myself eager to see what next week's puzzle was.

So, I watched each episode, enjoying the spark and energy between the interesting characters. I also noticed that the portrayal of the title character, Dr. Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie), was less than complimentary. The character is an irascible, rude curmudgeon, who is not very professional or caring toward his colleagues or patients. However, I must confess I did find myself chuckling and taking some pleasure in the crude banter and frequently antagonistic dialogue between House and his colleagues.

One week, I noticed that House began to make condescending, insulting, and downright maddening comments about nurses. I was not aware of the uprising that would be forthcoming from the nursing pro-

fession until later, when I found the Web site for The Center for Nursing Advocacy (<http://www.nursingadvocacy.org>), an organization devoted to giving nurses a voice in combating negative messages about nursing portrayed in the media, television, and other public venues. One of the Center's initiatives was entitled, "The House Campaign." Within its site, the Center documented the dialogue and evolution of Dr. House's increasingly insulting remarks about the nursing profes-

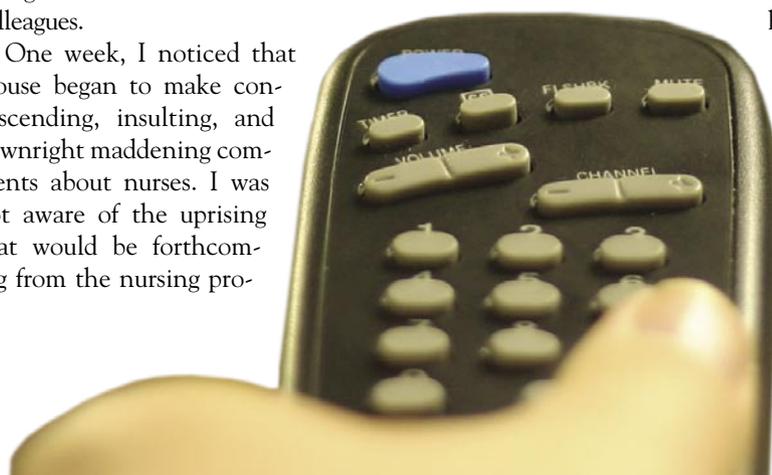
sion. My anger came to a boiling point during the November 8, 2005 episode, described below in an excerpt from the Center's House Campaign (2005):

Two recent episodes of "House" (Thomas L. Moran's "Daddy's Boy," aired on Nov. 8, 14 million viewers, and Sara Hess's "Spin," aired on Nov. 15, 13 million viewers) prove that the Fox show is more than capable of its own specific anti-nurse slurs. In these, "House"'s brilliant physician heroes suggest that they consider nurses unskilled clean-up staff, "nurse-maids" who are good for handling stool and patients who have fallen down. The money quote? Über-diagnostician and wit Greg House has just temporarily relieved a patient's thymoma with a Tensilon injection, and gone off on a "playing God" riff. When the drug wears off, as expected, the patient falls to the floor. House says this is "exactly why I created nurses," then calls out into the hallway, "clean-up on aisle three!" (¶1)

After I recovered from my first initial shock and anger at this dialogue, I realized it wasn't necessarily the crude comments House had made about nurses that angered me. After further reflection, I think what angered me the most was the fact that the show provides alternative views of members of other professional groups by portraying them in other scenes as competent, thoughtful,

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## SELECTED WEB SITES RELATED TO THE MEDIA AND HEALTH CARE

### The Center for Nursing Advocacy

<http://www.nursingadvocacy.org/action/action.html>

### Kaiser Family Foundation, Study of Entertainment Media and Health

<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/index.cfm>

### The Norman Lear Center

<http://www.learcenter.org/html/projects/?cm=hhs>

### Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing

<http://www.nursingsociety.org/media/main.html>

knowledgeable professionals. The public is shown how these professionals really work in their roles, with dignity, concern, and care toward patients. However, nurses have been virtually ignored in the show and do not appear except when mentioned by House. An accurate depiction of the nursing profession as deserving of respect is absent. This omission suggests a negative image of nurses' role to viewers and gives the impression that nurses are functionally absent from the hospital scene.

### WHAT I DID

I believe the remedy is not necessarily to change House's dialogue, because that is the character's persona, but rather to provide alternative, realistic scenarios of nurses performing their professional responsibilities and behaving in knowledgeable and caring ways toward patients. Television writers should portray nurses' roles accurately, to provide an alternative to the opinions expressed by the lead characters. Then television viewers will receive two things: accurate information about the profession and an alternative view more based in reality. For example, in many hospitals, nurses help educate interns and residents.

I returned to The Center for Nursing Advocacy Web site, which provided a great deal of documentation, research, and information about *House*, as well as many other negative portrayals of nurses. For the first time, I had located information that would help me voice my opinion. My letter-writing campaign began, using the information and some of the form letters on the Center's site, which also provides the addresses of writers and producers.

I am operating under the premise that "one person can make a difference." However, it will take the momentum of the entire profession to create truly meaningful change in the portrayal of nursing in the media. If nursing is to have any influence on the media, we must address these issues as a profession and counter inaccurate portrayals using an organized approach, such as the Center for Nursing Advocacy's initiatives.

Each of us should become informed about the power of the media and its effect on public perceptions. Many studies, books, and Web sites explore media portrayals of health care issues (Buresh & Gordon, 2001; Sigma Theta Tau International, 1997; Turow & Gans, 2002). These are readily available to those inter-

ested in further information (see the **Sidebar** on this page).

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

I encourage all nurses to become involved. Consider sending a letter or e-mail to a television producer or writer. There are almost 3 million RNs in America. If each of us writes one letter, we will have a powerful effect on the producers and writers of some of America's most popular television shows. It is essential that we target our efforts toward educating the public, increasing awareness of nursing, and countering the damaging effects of negative media portrayals at this time of desperate nursing shortages.

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