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The Nation

Eatery draws fire for 'sexy nurses'

Arizona's Heart Attack Grill is asked to stop using servers' costume.

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BALTIMORE — The specialty at the Heart Attack Grill in Tempe, Ariz., is a quadruple bypass burger that's stacked high with four half-pound beef patties, cheddar cheese, red onions, bacon, lettuce, tomato and a special sauce.

But it's not the burger's fat content or cholesterol payload that has angered the Baltimore-based Center for Nursing Advocacy. Rather, it's how the burger is served -- by waitresses dressed in revealing, naughty-nurse uniforms.

The waitresses wear stethoscopes around their necks and crosses on their nurse hats. They also wear fishnet stockings and tight, cleavage-baring tops. On occasion, they jump into the arms of their customers.

"Sexually available" is not the image that Sandy Summers believes should be projected of those in the healthcare profession.

A former trauma center nurse, Summers is founder and executive director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, which polices the portrayal of nurses worldwide. The biggest violators, in the center's view, are those who link nursing with titillation.

That's where the Heart Attack Grill comes in. Summers is pressuring the restaurant to drop its sexy nurse motif and has begun a letter-writing campaign against it.

"The endless association of sex and nurses leads people to believe that maybe nurses really are available to provide for the sexual needs of patients and physicians," Summers says. "It degrades the professional image, it demoralizes practicing nurses and drives any self-respecting person away from considering the profession."

But so far, most of the outrage has been directed at Summers. In e-mails, she has been called a "feminazi," a "pathetic liberal whack job" and worse. One critic suggested she rename her group "Advocates for Uptight Women."

The human target of Summers' campaign is Jon Basso, owner of Heart Attack Grill, who seems to be relishing the dust-up. In his mind, he is nothing less than a freedom fighter for men who like women and red meat.

"The nutshell of it is that I'm the press' whipping boy because I'm considered rather repugnant by traditional standards," Basso, 41, says in a phone interview from the restaurant. "But I believe I'm within my 1st Amendment rights to do whatever the hell I want to because it's not Nazi Germany yet. Give it 20 years and it may be."

Basso says his restaurant is "a real guy's place." The menu includes cigarettes, burgers, beer and "flatliner fries," which are "fried in pure lard."

He has devoted his website to chronicling his spat with Summers, posting letters from supporters and detractors. He says that the fight has improved business.

In September, an Arizona assistant state attorney general sent Basso a letter questioning his use of the word "nurse" to describe his waitresses. So as not to confuse people who might think the waitresses are real healthcare professionals (they are not), the letter suggested Basso drop "nurse" from his menu and advertisements.

Basso complied, to a degree. He put a disclaimer on his website, saying, "Heart Attack Grill nurses are NOT REAL NURSES." The waitresses who wear the skimpy nurse outfits say they mean no disrespect to actual nurses. They describe their revealing uniforms as harmless costumes.

"We're not trying to be rude or disgrace anybody," says Stacey Hoffmann, 23, who has worked at the Heart Attack Grill for a month. "I think nurses are great... If I had a better stomach, I might go into it myself."

Summers says she is no prude. She has no objection to short skirts or sexual imagery, only their association to the serious work of nursing.

"We're all for people having active, healthy sex lives," she says. "Go ahead and have sex, but if they could please leave the nursing image out of it. Fantasize about someone else."

Though more than 100 people have used the center's website to send letters of protest to the Heart Attack Grill, many more have told Summers she is a humorless, politically correct party-pooper. But she has found support within her profession.

Karen Kauffman, an interim dean at the University of Maryland's School of Nursing, said degrading images of nurses could contribute to a public health crisis. She said the U.S. Department of Labor had estimated that an additional 1.1 million nurses would be needed by 2012 to care for the country's aging population.

"With negative stereotyping like this, I can't understand why anyone would want to come into nursing," Kauffman said.