



## Nurses urge TV dramas: Get real

Portrayals deceive public, groups say

By CAROL ANN CAMPBELL  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Sandy Summers recalls the episode on "Grey's Anatomy" in which young doctors monitor a premature infant through the night shift on the neonatal unit.

In real life, she scoffs, trained neonatal nurses — not inexperienced interns — do that.

Then Summers describes a doctor on "ER" conducting a rape examination of a teenager.

At most hospitals, nurses with special training in sexual assault, not doctors, conduct those exams.

Summers turns to "House," another popular medical drama. She recalls a doctor helping a post-operative patient to the bathroom.

"When's the last time you saw a real physician do that?" said Summers, director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, a Baltimore-based nonprofit group.

Summers, backed by nurses around the nation, is waging a campaign against modern medical dramas.

Nurses say TV doctors often are shown doing the work of nurses, while nurses are mere wallpaper — if they show up in the dramas at all.

"On these shows, nurses just hand things to physicians, or they get physicians for other physicians," Summers said.

"Grey's Anatomy" topped the 10 Worst Portrayals of Nursing in the Media 2006. "House" and "ER" also made the list, though the group has praised "ER" in the past.

On TV, nurses complain, hospitals seem to run without nurses. And they almost never are portrayed as educated professionals making decisions that save lives. Instead, they see themselves portrayed as technicians subservient to the real stars — the doctors.

The stakes are high, they say, as hospitals try to fill positions in the midst of a nursing shortage.

"Young men and women are choosing other professions instead of nursing, in part because of the negative portrayal of nurses in the media," said Rebecca Patton, president of the American Nurses Association, based in Silver Spring, Md.

TV also influences career choices of young people, according to Darrell Luzzo, senior vice president of education for JA Worldwide (Junior Achievement).

For example, he said, in 2004 forensic medicine was 33 on a list of most popular career choices in the group's annual survey of young people. In 2005, it jumped to 23.

"So what happened from 2004 to 2005? The "CSI" shows went on the air," Luzzo said.

"And if something is not portrayed as meaningful or important, popularity wanes. People who care about nursing are right to be concerned," he said.

Producers of these shows insist their aim is to create entertaining dramas, not documentaries about hospitals.

"I know nurses complain that our show ignores nurses. And they're right," said David Shore, creator of "House," the Fox show watched each week by more than 15 million viewers.

"But the concept of the show is that Dr. House trusts nobody. If another doctor decided something, House would ignore him. He's dismissive of everyone," Shore said.

"I thought I had created a doctor so outrageous. But nurses tell me, 'He's not so outrageous,' Shore said, adding that his mother is a nurse.

"She loves the show," he said.

A representative of the ABC drama "Grey's Anatomy" declined comment because producers have not seen a copy of the report. Producers of "ER" also would not comment, said an NBC spokesman.

To nurses in the real world, their TV counterparts rarely ring true. No first-year medical resident could operate the machinery Kathy Sullivan handles as a nurse on the surgical intensive care unit at University Hospital in Newark.

"Doctors don't know how to operate some of these machines," she said.

Sullivan delivers the majority of the bedside care for her patients. On TV, nurses often stand by while the doctors save the lives. Sullivan sees things differently.

"I have gone home a million times feeling, 'I saved a life today,'" Sullivan said.

The shows rarely portray doctors and nurses working together.

"I know in trauma, we really work as a team. We do our own patient assessments. Then we have discussions. That's just not shown in these shows," said Olivia Nicastro, a trauma nurse at University Hospital.

Nurses can advance, but on TV smart nurses go to medical school. Nurses still complain that a few seasons back the writers of "ER" had one of their more interesting nurses, Abby Lockhart (played by Maura Tierney), go to medical school instead of advancing in nursing.

"We have graduates from our master's program making \$200,000 a year as executive vice presidents," said Phyllis Shanley Hansell, dean of the College of Nursing at Seton Hall in South Orange.

Nurses long for the days of "China Beach," the show that ran from 1988-1991 and featured actress Dana Delany as a nurse during the Vietnam War. She was tough and smart, saved lives, and never went to medical school.

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PHOTO CAPTION: 1. ABC's hit medical drama, "Grey's Anatomy," topped the list of the 10 Worst Portrayals of Nursing in the Media 2006. "People who care about nursing are right to be concerned," said Darrell Luzzo of Junior Achievement. CREDIT: 1.

SCOTT GARFIELD/ABC

GRAPHIC CAPTION:

LIST: Worst television depictions of nursing 2006

#### GREY'S ANATOMY

ABC: Executive Producers Shonda Rhimes, Mark Gordon, Betsy Beers, Jim Parriott  
Eight episodes are cited for such egregious slights as: "Nurse-based sexual degradation" and anti-nurse slurs. And "all nurses do is push papers and snap at physicians...Physicians are depicted as saving lives and handling exciting work that nurses do in real life."

#### THE SOPRANOS

HBO: Executive Producers David Chase, Mitchell Burgess, Robin Green, Brad Grey  
The episode "Mayham," (March 26), portrays "ICU nurses as nasty, rulebound physician subordinates who actually impede the psychosocial care of the gravely wounded Tony Soprano and his distraught family."

#### HOUSE

Fox: Executive Producers David Shore, Paul Attanasio, Katie Jacobs, Bryan Singer  
"House appears to be the only current, prime time U.S. hospital show to have made no effort to respond in the show itself to nurses' concerns about its misportrayal of nursing."

It seems to care “only about physician diagnosis, but that has never stopped its brilliant physician characters from providing all key bedside care, something nurses would normally do.”

ER

NBC: Executive Producers John Wells, Christopher Chulack, Michael Crichton, David Zabel

“We still believe that ‘ER’ did some good with the earlier episodes featuring nurse manager Eve Peyton, particularly the first two from October. We doubt any other current Hollywood show would have introduced such a clinically expert nurse character at all. But Peyton’s Christmas Eve departure, lightly spiced with the same old ‘support staff’ theme, was a lump of coal for anyone who would like to see nursing get the real respect it needs.”

In another episode, “nursing seems to represent the subordinate, low-skilled work that ambitious women have left behind.”

HEROES

NBC: Executive Producers Tim Kring, Dennis Hammer, Allan Arkush

“Presents hospice nursing as a dead-end job for dreamy, unduly self-sacrificing losers.”

CREDIT: THE STAR-LEDGER / SOURCE: The Center for Nursing Advocacy