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## Nurse advocate calls for less painful portrayals



August 24, 2009 by [Pashtana Usufzy](#)

### Group founder wants more autonomy for TV nurses

Nurses are not ill-educated or low-skilled.

Nurse advocate Sandy Summers, the founder and executive director of The Truth About Nursing organization had this to say when she spoke to UNLV students, faculty and local members of the medical profession on August 12.

“[People] think they know what nurses do because they watch TV,” Summers said.

Summers, who was invited to speak by UNLV nursing school dean, and The Truth About Nursing advisory panel member Carolyn Yucha, have worked since 2001 to improve the perception of the nursing profession and the way nurses are portrayed on medical dramas like ‘House’ and ‘Grey’s Anatomy.’

“Nursing is a very worthwhile profession that contributes to health care,” Yucha said, “and the media does a very bad job of showing that.”

Both Yucha and Summers believe that television portrayals of nurses as ignorant women without advanced knowledge of medicine encourage misconceptions that put patients at risk.

“A patient who has some symptom and doesn’t tell their nurse and waits for their [doctor]...puts [himself] at risk,” Yucha said.

Summers said the image of nursing in the media could only be improved through cooperation and communication between the press and those in the nursing profession.

“The [organization] decided to reach out to the media to change the way they portray nursing,” Summers said.

According to Summers, reaching out involves hosting discussions and writing letters to the executives of different television shows requesting more realistic portrayals of the nurses who work in hospitals and doctors’ offices every day.

“A lot of those shows show [doctors] doing things nurses would normally be doing,” Yucha said.

She explained that television shows often pay physicians to consult on medical dramas to make sure scenes are realistic and nurses are often characterized only as physicians would like them to be seen.

The most widespread misapprehensions about nursing, Summers said, are that nurses cannot have medical degrees and that they are employed simply to push gurneys and “do the physician’s bidding.”

Nurses themselves, Summers stated, often perpetuate the stereotypes.

She said when nurses don’t correct misconceptions, they are furthering them.

“A lot of nurses don’t speak out enough to friends and family,” she said, adding that many in the field feel it is their duty to “keep [their] heads down and [their] hands busy.”

“Nurses have actually helped to diagnose illnesses because they are at the bedside and can put the symptoms together,” Yucha said.

Battling unflattering stereotypes also means fighting the misconceptions that may seem positive to those outside of the profession.

Summers is bothered by depictions of nurses as patient saints or angels because they provide an unrealistic view that allows people to ignore the amount of work some nurses may have to take on.

“There’s a difference between being compassionate and being angels,” she said.

Summers and The Truth About Nursing also advocate for “nurse-friendly language” in the media and for everyday usage.

Summers said referring to only physicians as doctors indicates that nurses do not have medical degrees and calling a doctor’s suggestions to a nurse ‘orders’ suggests a lack of autonomy for nursing staff members.

“Language affects the way we think,” she said.

According to the group’s Web site, The Truth About Nursing organization “seeks to increase public understanding of the central, front-line role nurses play in modern health care.”

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