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Nurse, I Need a Reality Check

Hollywood shapes many perceptions of medical professionals but that's a problem for real-life nurses

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Showtime's 'Nurse Jackie' is one TV drama that a nurse advocacy group feels presents an accurate image of the profession.

Faiza Elmasry

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Many people get a lot of information about various professions from watching television and the movies. That's a big concern for nurses who mostly don't like how they are portrayed by Hollywood.

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That's where The Truth about Nursing comes in. The advocacy group works to improve the media's depiction of nurses to make them as close to reality as possible.

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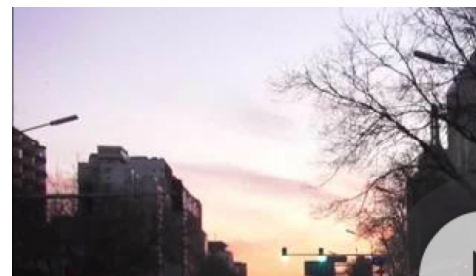
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Nurse Nikkie Raleigh says watching a thoughtless nurse in a movie was upsetting and not true to life.

"In the movie, the little girl is dying. It's a very sad situation and the nurse comes in and says to the family quite abruptly, 'You all need to go home, visiting hours are over.' And she walks out of the room," says Raleigh.

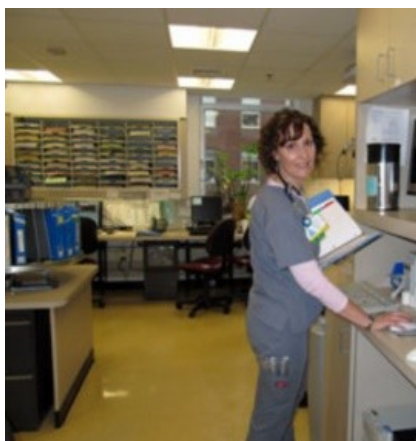
"I was thinking to myself, 'Gosh, does my niece think this is what really happens? All nurses are like this or this is how we act towards patients?' It just made me sad. It just embarrassed me in front of my niece."

Raleigh's co-worker at the hospital, Neysa Ernst, says nurse portrayals on television are not much better.

Good and bad

"There are 2.9 million nurses in the United States. There are 790,000 physicians. And yet when you watch the TV programs, you see the physicians doing all of the work that nurses normally do," says Ernst.

"Nurses are the ones that are doing the EKGs. Nurses are the people who are taking the patient back and forth to the tests, making sure that procedures are administered appropriately. I don't see that on television."



Registered Nurse Neysa Ernst of Johns Hopkins says nurse depictions on TV don't reflect reality.

A group of nursing students founded The Truth about Nursing nine years ago to encourage the media to present a more realistic portrayal of their profession. This year, the group released its 'Decade Awards' - a list of the best and worst media portrayals of nursing since 2000.

Co-founder and executive director of The Truth About Nursing, Sandy Summers, says NBC's new hospital drama, "Mercy," comes in at the top of the list.

"That's an excellent show for nursing. [Nurses] are the center of the care. They are fearsome advocates for their patients. They are tenacious," Summers says.

"They go the extra mile to make sure that [their patients] get what they need to stay alive or to die a peaceful death."

The truth about nursing

Coleen McGuinness is a story editor for the television series. She says the writers make sure the characters on the show have real lives.

"We've had nurses talk to us about how they have these really extremely difficult cases - you know, patients who die, seeing awful things all day - but then they have to be able to sort of put it aside and go on with their lives. It's something that we've tried to incorporate into the show," says McGuinness.

"The other thing we're trying to do, of course, is to have a number of



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consultants, both on the set and in the writers' room - doctors, nurses who can give us real stories and tell us exactly what would happen, so we can be as realistic as possible."

Showtime's "Nurse Jackie" is another TV drama that the group feels presents an accurate image of nurses.

"Nurse Jackie is an excellent nurse, even though she has some personal flaws, a drug addiction. There are drug addict nurses, which is something that we have to face and do something about. So we cannot say it's not reality, but of course, not all nurses are drug addicts," says Summers.

"There is not so much emphasis on her drug addiction, [there is] more on the life-saving skills that she has and her interventions. She is a fearsome advocate for patients and protects them and does everything she can to get them the best care, no matter who she has to take on."



The Truth About Nursing gives Showtime's 'Nurse Jackie' a thumbs up, but TV shows like 'Grey's Anatomy' and 'House' do not fare as well.

Richie Jackson is the show's executive producer. He's pleased The Truth About Nursing recognized the truth about "Nurse Jackie."

"Our goal was to be as authentic as possible when we portray nurses. We started with the idea that this show should be about nurses, that nurses wouldn't be the supporting players to the doctors," says Jackson.

"What we're trying to portray is how Jackie and the other nurses are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. It's hard to imagine having a job where every day is life or death."

Bad medicine

Some of the most popular hospital dramas - ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" and "Private Practice," and Fox's "House" - made the Worst of the Decade list. Summers says the problem is that the basic concept of those shows is backwards.

"They set it up where there will be about 10 physician characters and zero nurse characters," she says. "But if you're going to portray a hospital and the health care that goes on in it, you can't possibly tell the whole story of what happens to patients if you do not include nurses delivering nursing care."

And when that care is shown, Summers says, it often does not reflect the education and specialization of today's nurses. She says unless that changes, nursing will not be able to attract talented students who want to make it their career.

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