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NURSING NEWS

Nurses and the Media: A Call to Action at UCLA Symposium

By Debra Wood, RN, contributor

May 11, 2012 - Tired of watching physicians start IVs on *House*? How about "naughty nurses" cheering a basketball team on national television? Now's the time for nurses to step forward and let the world know about the profession. That's the message coming from the UCLA School of Nursing's symposium "Nurses and the Media: A Call to Action."



Diana J. Mason, RN, PhD, urged nurses to speak up, because it's important to the profession and the health of the public.

"It's important to the profession, and it's important to the health of the public," said symposium presenter Diana J. Mason, RN, Ph.D., the Rudin professor of nursing and co-director of the Center for Health, Media and Policy at the Hunter College, City University of New York. "We have perspectives other health professionals don't have."

Nurses can share their expertise, not just one on one with patients but with the public.

"There are big things, small things and middle-sized things we can all do," said MarySue Heilemann, RN, Ph.D., associate professor at the UCLA School of Nursing and symposium creator. "We have to talk about this to get more and more people informed, interested and activated."

UCLA held a symposium last year on the same topic and learned how physicians had made a concerted effort to put members of that profession in front of the media and in entertainment shows. Attendees analyzed and discussed the effect negative or empty portrayals of nurses have on the public's perception.



MarySue Heilemann, RN, PhD, at the 2011 UCLA symposium.

"The entertainment industry influences how people think about health, nursing and health care," Mason said.

"Some of the inaccurate stereotyping in the entertainment media could to a large extent be overcome with paying attention to the news media," Mason said. However, she added, "We shouldn't back off of trying to push producers and writers to represent nurses more accurately."

Kaleen Cullen, FNP, Ph.D., assistant director of the nursing program at California State University, Channel Islands, presented a review on the state of the science in research on the image of nurses in media and the effect the media has on people.

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MarySue Heilemann, RN, PhD, created the Nurses and the Media: A Call to Action symposium to raise awareness and spur nurses to speak up.

"Reruns and current shows are being shown in different countries all over the world, and how they portray nurses has an effect on how people in any society perceive nursing," Heilemann said. That could contribute to the global nursing shortage and funding for nursing education.

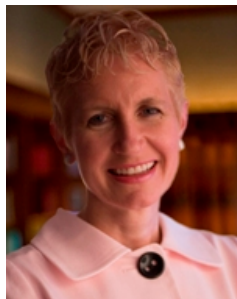
Theresa Brown, BSN, RN, OCN, a regular contributor to the *New York Times*; Deborah Glik, a UCLA professor in public health who has done research on health communication in public media; and Kia Skrine Jeffers, a former Hollywood actor and now a nurse, joined a roundtable discussion where participants engaged the audience in a discussion about nurses stepping up to the plate.

"We're not good at talking about or writing about what we do, and there are not a lot of people listening," Brown said. "I encourage nurses to speak up about what we do, and if more of us do that, it will get easier."

Brown did just that, writing an unsolicited article for the *Times* and, once published, approaching editors about becoming a regular contributor. She indicated that other nurses could do the same at their local papers or start with a letter to the editor.

Nurses can improve the profession's image

"More nurses need to invest in presenting nursing [positively] and get involved in their hometown," said Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, founder and executive director of The Truth About Nursing in Baltimore and co-author of *Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk*. Summers spoke at last year's UCLA symposium. "You have to shake and push and wake people up."



Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, encourages nurses to get involved in their community and let people know what they do, how they change and save lives.

Contributing to the problem is the public's undervaluing of women's work, Summers said, since most nurses are women. Nursing research and funding for residencies is far less than for the medical profession.

"We can change the way people think about nursing," Summers said. "Society does not know what nurses do."

Summers has outlined a multitude of ways nurses can start changing perceptions in their local communities at the Truth About Nursing website. That includes talking with friends and neighbors about the work they do, not being afraid to discuss the life saved or the difference one made in someone's life.

"Change comes from reaching people on a local level," Summers said.

Suzanne Gordon, co-author of *From Silence to Voice: What Nurses Know and Must Communicate To The Public* and other books about nursing, encourages nurses to start at the hospital level, to suggest nursing stories for hospital publications and websites and to talk with patients and their families about what they are doing and why.

"Over a year, that's a lot of people," Gordon said. "There are so many steps nurses can take that are comfortable steps."

Nurses and the media

Barbara Glickstein, RN, MPH, MS, co-director of the Center for Health, Media & Policy, co-hosts with Mason the Healthstyles radio show on WBAI, the only nurse-produced radio program in New York City.

"It creates a space for the voice of nurses and other health professionals who are often underrepresented to the general public," Glickstein said.

News media and trade publications often do not include a nursing perspective in their stories, which Mason suggests is often because nurses do not seek out such interviews. Even when the chance to do so presents itself, nurses often back away.

"Physicians often don't pass on an opportunity," Glickstein added.

Glickstein encouraged nurses to start locally in their community. Know which reporters cover health issues, contact them and offer to serve as a source or to provide tips about trends, such as an uptick in tuberculosis cases.

Mason suggested nurses obtain media training to prepare for interviews. The Center for Health, Media and Policy offers media training.

Glickstein recommends nurses learn how to create an interview plan, with three short messages and an action request, if appropriate. The training sessions also include how to bring the conversation back to those messages and to practice the skills in mock interviews. She acknowledges that, with any media contact, some statements may be taken out of context or be misquoted.

"That fear is blown up," Glickstein said. "Know your stuff, know what you don't know and know to say, 'I will get back to you.' That's a great question."

Nurses also can start blogging or tweeting and interacting with journalists from both traditional and new sources of media.

"We want nurses to be media makers in addition to being interviewed by traditional media—print and broadcast," Glickstein said. "We are great story tellers. We have information and are great teachers and educators."

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