



[Search Jobs](#)
[My HealthCallings.com](#)
[MyResume](#)
[Search Agents](#)
[Saved Jobs](#)
[Career News](#)

Be respected for the important role you play in healthcare.
 Learn more at TakeCareCareers.com/nursepractitioner



[All Categories](#)
[Job Hunting](#)
[Specialties](#)
[Career Management](#)

How You Can Influence Nurses' Portrayal in Media

BY EILEEN BEAL | MAY 6, 2013 | POSTED IN [CAREER MANAGEMENT](#)

TAGS: [ALLIED HEALTH](#), [EXECUTIVE/PROFESSIONAL](#), [HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY](#), [LABORATORY](#), [NURSING](#), [PHARMACY](#), [PHYSICIAN](#), [SUPPORT STAFF](#)

Health Callings spoke recently with Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, founder and executive director of [The Truth About Nursing](#) and co-author of "Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All At Risk," about the negative messages the public is getting about nurses and nursing — and what nurses can do to combat them.



Gallup's Professional Ratings Poll in 2012 showed that nurses are the most respected profession. Yet on TV, in movies, in ads, and even in traditional print media, nurses are physicians' gofers, paper pushers, clueless bimbos, bit players or sex pots. Why the disconnect?

Well, the Gallup Poll actually measures "ethics and honesty" — terms that are often conflated with "respect" or "trust." But they're not the same. People may trust nurses to be ethical and honest enough to guard their valuables while they're incapacitated. But they do not respect our education or skills enough to think we can save their lives. Media creators act as if they already know what nurses do by watching decades of inaccurate media where nurses push gurneys, fetch things for physicians, answer phones.... What the media *isn't* doing is talking to nurses, or learning what nurses actually do by following them around.

A major topic of yours is that the media's negative portrayal of nursing and nurses puts all nurses at risk. What kind of risk?

Yes, we are concerned about how negative media portrayals put nurses at risk. But more fundamentally, we're concerned how such portrayals put *patients* at risk. The media presents physicians as doing all the meaningful work that nurses do in real life, leaving little of value or interest for nurse characters to perform. This suggests that nursing isn't all that difficult and doesn't require much education. This lack of public understanding of nursing leads to an undervaluation of nursing, which consequently leads decision makers to underfund nursing education, research, residencies and clinical practice such as through poor staffing ratios.

Nurses go into nursing to help people. So when hospitals understaff or replace RNs with nursing assistants and techs, nurses are run ragged trying to keep patients alive, which puts their own health at risk. This leaves nurses demoralized, being unable to adequately help their patients, so they burn out. Research shows that care from burned-out or

Latest Healthcare Jobs

[HEDIS Medical Record Review Consultant Job](#)

Coventry Health Care - Saint Louis, MO

[Cardiac Services Manager](#)

Cheyenne Regional Medical Center - Cheyenne, WY

[Senior Social Worker - LCSW required - Geriatric Psychiatry - Baylor Medical Center at Irving -](#)

Baylor Health Care System - Irving, TX

[Department Manager Leader Emergency Department](#)

Kaiser Permanente - Vacaville, CA

[Staff Pharmacist needed for Arkansas Hospital](#)

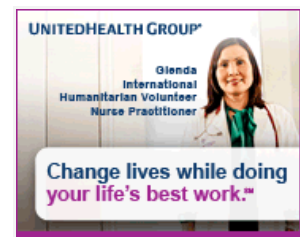
CompHealth - Arkansas, AR

[Post a job](#) [See all jobs](#)

Search HealthCallings Career News

Follow Health Callings

Featured employer



understaffed nurses leads to higher patient mortality.

Why was “The Truth About Nursing” started? And what does the organization do?

As graduate students at Johns Hopkins, five of us started our nursing advocacy group in 2001 when we saw a budget proposal to cut national funding for nursing education and community health nursing — decisions we felt stemmed from an undervaluation of nursing. We wanted to start a project to help resolve the global nursing shortage and we saw improving nursing’s media image and increasing the value on nursing as the most effective way to do that.

Our first effort was to try to improve the portrayal of nurses on “ER,” the most influential health TV show at the time. Our 2003 letter-writing campaign got global media coverage and eventually the show did make slight improvements for nursing (but still not enough).

We monitor the media for bad and good depictions of nurses and nursing and we report on our website how well the media is doing at portraying nurses. We launch letter-writing campaigns to ask the media to change or remove damaging depictions of nurses and we have had many successes. We aren’t just interested in portrayals of flawless nurses.

We think “Nurse Jackie” is one of the best TV shows for nursing. Even though Jackie’s a deeply flawed character, she makes astute assessments and courageous interventions, she takes on physicians, insurance companies and patient-dumping hospitals.... She’s a tireless and fearsome advocate for her patients, the kind of intelligent, autonomous nurse that viewers need to see.

Can nurses find ideas for how they can help combat negative portrayals of nurses at your website?

Absolutely! Our [action page](#) has hundreds of different ideas for taking action, not just for nurses, students and faculty, but also for the general public, foundations and hospitals. And there’s information about how to start a local chapter, too.

You’ve been monitoring how nurses are portrayed in the media for over 12 years. What is the biggest change you’ve seen? And what’s stayed the same?

We always tell people that we’re on the 500-year plan. The change we envision will take a long time — and we need more help.

Hollywood is slow to change; “Grey’s Anatomy” is abysmal for nursing. But three positive nursing shows did launch in 2009; “Hawthorne” [TNT], “Mercy” [NBC] and “Nurse Jackie” [ShowTime]; and in 2012, the excellent “Call the Midwife” began on BBC America.

The handmaiden and unskilled loser stereotypes remain the predominant images of nursing, and the ones that most undermine nursing’s claims to adequate resources. Most persistent and damaging is the presentation of physicians as the only health professionals who save lives. To combat this misimpression, readers can get a free “SAVE LIVES. BE A NURSE” bumper sticker from us — just email me at ssummers@truthaboutnursing.org. We must educate the world that nurses save lives, *nurses have value*.

© Health Callings, Dice Holdings Inc., 2013



About Eileen Beal

Eileen Beal, MA, began covering healthcare and medical education -- writing for HealthCare News and Hospital Report, MDNews, Nursing Weekly, Crains

Top Stories on HealthCallings

1. [3 Interview Questions for a Medical Scheduler](#)



2. [Shower Your Co-workers With Praise](#)



3. [Career Snapshot: Medical Volunteers for Olympians](#)



4. [Sample Resume for Home Health Aide](#)



5. [How to Overcome Shyness During a Panel Interview](#)



6. [Top Career Path for Nurses: Oncology Care](#)



7. [How to Get the Job Despite Being Underqualified](#)



8. [Nursing Certifications to Help You Get Ahead](#)



9. [Have Some Fun as a Camp Nurse](#)



10. [4 Skills for Nurse Manager Positions](#)



HealthCallings Writers



Eileen Beal



Lisa Broesch



Roberta Chinsky Matuson



Marcia Frellick



Elisabeth Greenbaum Kasson



Jan Hunter

Cleveland Business Journal, Kaiser Permanente, University Hospitals/CASE Medical Center and Cleveland Clinic -- almost 20 years ago. She's written/co-written several health-related books and her articles have appeared in Arthritis Today, BottomLine Health, This Active Life and dozens of other consumer-focused publications and online at WebMD and Vidacura.com.

[View all posts by Eileen Beal](#)



Joy Taylor



Kim McAllister



Sue Mellen



Chakisse Newton



Stephenie Overman



Lois Roelofs



Terry Sheridan



Rosa Talavera

[Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Security Tips](#) | [Privacy Statement](#) | [Work at Health Callings](#)

Copyright © 1998 - 2013 HealthCallings.com All rights reserved. Use of this site is subject to certain [Terms and Conditions.](#)

5