

WHO COUNTS IN NEWS COVERAGE OF HEALTH CARE?

In a study of the sources of health care news, nurses appeared to be virtually silent: Journalists do not seek out nurses as sources of information on health care. Even female journalists adhere to the same definition of expertise held by their male colleagues and virtually never use nurses as a source of news.

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Health care issues and the health care crisis receive a great deal of media attention. Articles about the health care crisis—a crisis of access, cost, and quality—frequently appear in all hard news sections and often make the front pages of newspapers. By devoting extensive coverage to health care, newspapers are responding to serious reader interest. In a major study conducted for the Times Mirror Company, in which Americans ranked the topics of news coverage that are most important to them, 44 percent said they followed health coverage very closely.¹ The only category of news of greater interest to those surveyed were reports about people and events in their own communities.

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Health news topped every other category of interest including education, local government, international affairs, sports, and entertainment.

Who Do Journalists Use as Sources?

In the last half of 1990, the Women, Press & Politics Project conducted a study on behalf of Nurses of America to determine whom journalists used as sources of information for health-care coverage in order to get a clearer picture of the breadth or narrowness of their choices. Of particular interest was the degree to which nurses were represented as sources of information on health care.

As part of the scope of the study, the investigators also wanted to know to what extent women were represented in news and analysis of health care. Moreover they wanted to know the occupations of those women who were covered. Beyond that they wanted to know whether the full range of women's roles and expertise were made visible in news coverage.

In addition to collecting general data on health care coverage, the investigators paid particular attention to several major "care issues" such as maternal and child health, aging, chronic illness, AIDS, drug addiction and disease prevention. These care issues encompass many of the health problems Americans face today which cannot be "cured" solely by diagnosis and treatment.

These health problems depend on nursing care for alleviation as much as, or even more than, medical intervention. Thus, the investigators asked, were nurses consulted about health care issues which are nursing problems? By asking such questions, the investigators wanted to determine whether the complexity of the health care universe, and the breadth of expertise in it, was reflected in press coverage.

Another question was whether the greater role women journalists play in the press today affected the types of sources sought out and subjects covered. Do women journalists enlarge the definition of "expert sources," and include the expertise, experience, insights and analyses of those society has considered "subordinates?"

The researchers analyzed the content of 423 articles on health care that appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* in the first quarter of 1990. These newspapers were chosen because they devote substantial resources to the coverage of health care and because they are considered to be influential in public policy and press circles. Each newspaper averaged more than one health care article per day for the three months of coverage (January 1, 1990 to March 31, 1990) analyzed in the study. The articles collected for the study were all those categorized as pertaining to health care for the period by the National Newspaper Index. The content of each article was coded for multiple variables.

The 423 health care articles were found throughout the newspapers, including the editorial and op-ed pages. Fifty-one articles (12.06 percent) started on the front page of the newspapers.

Nurses Quoted Least Often

When up to five directly quoted sources of information in each of the 423 articles were counted by their "occupational" category, nearly one-third (32.38 percent) of the sources quoted were described as doctors by profession or title (Table 1). Of 908 sources directly quoted, nurses—the largest profession in the health care system—were at the bottom of the ranked list with only ten quotes (1.10 percent). Persons in every other "occupational"

Quotations		Sources		References	
Number of Quotes	Percent		Number of References	Percent	
294	32.38	Doctors	109	36.95	
168	18.50	Government	70	23.73	
150	16.62	Business	14	4.75	
99	10.90	Nonprofits	18	6.10	
39	4.30	Educators	13	4.41	
39	4.30	Spokespersons	14	4.75	
34	3.74	Medical Organizations	4	1.36	
25	2.75	Patients	21	7.12	
18	1.98	Family	6	2.03	
18	1.98	Health Professionals	18	6.10	
14	1.54	Workers	4	1.36	
10	1.10	Nurses	4	1.36	
908	100.00	Totals	295	100.00	

category, out of 12 categories, were quoted more frequently than nurses. After doctors, government officials and business people were those most frequently quoted. Near the bottom of the ranking were patients, family members, other white-collar health professionals,

and nonprofessional hospital workers. Persons in all these categories were quoted more frequently than nurses.

Similarly, when up to five sources of indirect statements or paraphrases were referred to by "occupational" category, doctors accounted for more ref-

Occupations	F(N)	Percent	M(N)	Percent	Unknown(N)	Percent	TOTALS	PERCENTS
Doctors	54	18.37	239	81.39	1	0.34	294	32.38
Government	16	9.52	150	89.29	2	1.19	168	18.50
Business	18	12.00	130	86.67	2	1.33	150	16.52
Nonprofits	29	29.29	69	69.70	1	1.01	99	10.90
Educators	6	15.38	33	84.62	0	0.00	39	4.30
Spokespersons	13	33.33	26	66.67	0	0.00	39	4.30
Medical Orgs	5	14.71	29	85.29	0	0.00	34	3.74
Patients	8	32.00	17	68.00	0	0.00	25	2.75
Family	10	55.56	5	27.78	3	16.67	18	1.98
Health Pros	4	22.22	13	72.22	1	5.56	18	1.98
Workers	5	35.71	8	57.14	1	7.14	14	1.54
Nurses	9	90.00	1	10.00	0	0.00	10	1.10
TOTALS	177		720		11		908	
PERCENTS	19.49		79.30		1.21		100.00	

*F=female; M=male

Table 3

Quotations by *Gender-Ranked (N=423)

Occupations	F(N)	Percent	M(N)	Percent	Unknown(N)	Percent	TOTALS	PERCENTS
Doctors	16	14.68	93	85.32	0	0.00	109	36.95
Government	23	32.86	41	58.57	6	8.57	70	23.73
Business	3	21.43	10	71.43	1	7.14	14	4.75
Nonprofits	3	16.67	14	77.78	1	5.56	18	6.10
Educators	0	0.00	12	92.31	1	7.69	13	4.41
Spokespersons	6	42.86	8	57.14	0	0.00	14	4.75
Medical Orgs	0	0.00	3	75.00	1	25.00	4	1.36
Patients	13	61.90	8	38.10	0	0.00	21	7.12
Family	2	33.33	2	33.33	2	33.33	6	2.03
Health Pros	7	38.89	11	61.11	0	0.00	18	6.10
Workers	0	0.00	1	25.00	3	75.00	4	1.36
Nurses	4	100.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	1.36
TOTALS	77		203		15		295	
PERCENTS	26.10		68.81		5.08		100.00	

*F=female; M=male

erences (36.95 percent) than any other group. Out of 295 references, nurses were referred to for information only four times in news stories, tying for last place with nonprofessional hospital

workers and administrators in medical organizations.

When sources of direct quotations were categorized by gender, female doctors were clearly being allowed to

“speak” in news stories. Indeed they accounted for 18.37 percent (54 out of 294) of the quotes by doctors. (See Table 2.) This representation is slightly higher than the percentage of female doctors (16 percent) found in the profession. Women were represented to varying degrees in other occupational groupings. They were a third (33.33 percent) of the public relations or public information spokespersons who were quoted, and had a relatively strong representation (29.29 percent) as nonprofit organization sources, but probably were underrepresented in terms of their actual employment as government officials, business persons and educators. Although nine out of the ten nurses quoted were women, nurses as an occupational group were quoted the least.

When sources of paraphrased statements (references) were coded by gender, the percentages of female government officials (32.86 percent), professional spokespersons for organizations (42.86 percent), and white-collar health professionals other than nurses (38.89 percent) were quite high (Table 3). Nurses, again, were among the lowest ranking groups. Interestingly, when patients were paraphrased in articles, they were more likely to be women; but when they were quoted, they were more likely to be men.

When one main source of information was determined for each of the 423 articles and coded according to the institution or group the source represented (Table 4), only one nurse representing nursing as a profession was ever the main source (.24 percent). In contrast, doctors represented physicians as a profession in 31 articles (7.33 percent). The main sources for 28.13 percent (119) of the health care articles represented some level of government, indicating a heavy reliance on government for news.

Additionally, the main sources in the 423 articles were correlated with the topics they discussed. In 119 of the articles, the main source was a representative of government, and the topic of discussion was also government in 45 out of 119 articles. In a lesser (20) number of articles, government officials discussed patients. Of all the topics discussed by doctors, patients (14 out of 31 articles) consti-

Table 4

Main Sources by Affiliation-Ranked (N=423)

Sources	Number of Articles	Percent
Government	119	28.13
None of the Above (opinion/editorial)	70	16.55
Researchers	46	10.87
Business	32	7.57
Doctors (physicians as a profession)	31	7.33
Advocacy Groups	28	6.62
Hospitals	22	5.20
Journalists/publishers/media	15	3.55
Medical Schools	13	3.07
Universities (nonmedical)	10	2.36
Insurers	8	1.89
Attorneys	5	1.18
Medical Associations	5	1.18
Patients	5	1.18
Family member	3	.71
Educators	2	.47
HMOs	2	.47
Nursing Associations	2	.47
Treatment Centers/Clinics (not hospitals)	2	.47
Employees	1	.24
Nurses (as a profession)	1	.24
Public	1	.24
Total	423	100.00

tuted the most frequent topic.

The study included a number of subject areas in which nursing plays a major role (Table 5). These major "care issues" are nursing problems as well as medical problems. They include AIDS, maternal and child health, aging, drug addiction, chronic illness, disease prevention, right to die, informed consent and access to medical care. Some of these care issues were heavily represented in news coverage. Articles on AIDS accounted for more than one-fifth (21.28 percent) of the sample. Articles dealing with three care issues—AIDS, disease prevention, and access to care, made up more than half (56.50 percent) of the sample.

Nurses Ignored in Areas of Expertise

Nurses were almost entirely absent as sources of information even in those areas that heavily depend upon nursing (one out of 423 articles). For example, nurses play a critical role in the care of AIDS patients in hospitals, in outpatient clinics, and in homes. Yet a nurse was the main source of information for only one of the 90 articles on AIDS. In the next largest category, disease prevention, which is one of the foundations of nursing practice, no nurses appear as main sources of information. Similarly, no nurse is a main source in any of the articles covering access to health care, drug addiction, chronic illness, maternal-child health, right to die, geriatrics, and informed consent—areas in which nurses are also central and responsible for major program innovations.

Aside from a solitary story on AIDS, not once does a nurse have the opportunity to set the context of an article. On only rare occasions (10 articles), were nurses directly or indirectly quoted as sources of information. This means that a nurse rarely was able to contribute her or his considerable knowledge and expertise to the discussion.

For example, in a lengthy *New York Times* article (Jan. 30, 1990, page C1) on heart transplants for infants, numerous doctors and parents are quoted describing how infants with transplants are faring. Despite the fact that nurses care for such infants 24-hours-a-day in Neonatal Intensive Care Units and know in a very detailed way their problems

Table 5			
Major Care Issues (N=423)			
Major Care Issues	Articles	Percent	Cumulative Percent
AIDS	90	21.28	21.28
Disease Prevention	80	18.91	40.19
Access	69	16.31	56.50
Drugs	33	7.80	64.30
Chronic Illness	28	6.62	70.92
Maternal/Child Health	2	5.20	76.12
Right to Die	9	2.13	78.25
Geriatrics	7	1.65	79.91
Consent	3	.71	80.61
None of the Above	82	19.39	100.00
Total	423	100.00	100.00

and outcomes, no nurse is included as a source of information in the article. Although the article points out that "all the babies are closely monitored," it gives no hint as to who is doing the monitoring, or what that monitoring involves, thus restricting the view of the critical role nurses play.

Similarly, a *New York Times* article (Mar. 28, 1990, page 1) dealing in detail with care arrangements for elderly Americans, fails to call upon any of the many respected nursing experts in geriatrics. The article, the second part of a four-part series on the elderly, mentions nurses in passing, but fails to consult them as sources that could give dimension to the health care needs of older people. "Most

health policy experts agree that too many people live in nursing homes not because they need much medical attention but because that is the most widely available option," the article states. This is undoubtedly true, but the article would be more accurate if it had pointed out that many people are in nursing homes because they have *nursing* needs. Nurses certainly could have elucidated these needs and contributed to the discussion of nursing home and alternate care arrangements.

There were many instances throughout the study sample where the inclusion of nursing experts would have provided a fuller or more accurate account of pressing health care issues.

Table 6							
Gender of Author and Gender of Main Sources (N=423)							
Gender of Main Source							
	Female (percent)	Male (percent)	Unknown (percent)	News Agency (percent)	Total (percent)	Articles (N)	(percent)
Female authors	23.53	57.14	4.20	15.13	100.00	119	(28.13)
Male authors	16.01	62.32	8.37	13.30	100.00	203	(47.99)
News Agency	9.90	35.64	32.67	21.78	100.00	101	(23.88)

When the articles in the sample were categorized according to their overall focus, four major aspects of health care—policies and programs, research studies, legal issues, and delivery systems—constituted 83.45 percent of the news.

Although medical research was the focus of 26.24 percent of the articles, the burgeoning field of nursing research was entirely absent from the sample. For example, research funded through the National Center for Nursing Research (part of the National Institutes for Health) in Washington, D.C., did not make the news.

Little Difference in the Work of Women Journalists

This study indicates that women journalists are involved to a substantial degree in the coverage of health care. Where it was possible to determine the gender, female bylines accounted for nearly 35 percent of the health care articles published by *The Washington Post*. Female bylines were more or less a quarter of the articles published by *The Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. Male bylines nonetheless accounted for close to half of the total sample. In the agency or wire service category (101 of the 423 articles), seven were co-authored by males and females, 66 were articles or editorials written by unnamed authors, and 25 were wire service or news agency reports lacking bylines.

Finally, the fact that women were the authors of 119 of the health care articles did not make any appreciable difference in the representation of nursing in the sample—a profession that is 97 percent female.

In those articles which women clearly authored, there was a slightly larger percentage of female main sources (23.53 percent) than in those authored by men (16.01 percent), lending credence to the assertion that women reporters tend to speak more frequently to female sources than do men.² While women quoted more female main sources, however, they appeared to select the same kind of experts that men do, and adhered to the same definition of expertise as male journalists (Table 6). Women journalists did not seek out nurses or report on nursing any more frequently than their male colleagues.

Nurses Not Among Those Who Count in News Coverage

In this study of the sources of health care news, nurses were virtually silent. The investigators expected nurses to be underrepresented in terms of their numbers and importance to the health care system. But the degree to which nurses were overlooked by journalists as sources of information was surprising given the fact that many nursing organizations interact regularly with the press. In terms of this sample, journalists do not appear to seek out nurses as sources of information on health care. Nurses are not among those who count in news coverage.

It is beyond the scope of this study to supply the reasons for this glaring omission. Surely there are many, and certainly some of them have to do with the culture of this society and of nursing, as well as with the conventions of news reporting. This is an area rich with research possibilities.

However, some of the consequences of nursing's silence in the news media must be noted. The press has a well recognized obligation to inform the public about areas it covers. The fact that it routinely overlooks nurses raises significant questions about the accuracy of its depiction of the health care universe.

In terms of nursing, it is difficult for a group to have influence in the development of public policy and the allocation of resources unless it can be seen and heard as part of the public discussion. The role of nursing as a contributor to the health care system is limited if the press, for whatever reason, does not consider nursing a legitimate or credible source or subject.

Finally, a truncated view of health care affects the choices the public can make. How can members of the public know what options exist in terms of their health care unless a full picture is presented to them?

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