

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Nursing on television: student perceptions of television's role in public image, recruitment and education

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Abstract

Aims. To explore nursing students' perceptions of how their profession is portrayed on medical television programmes.

Background. Recruitment and retention in nursing have been linked to the image of the profession in society. Images of nursing in popular media frequently draw on stereotypes that may damage the appeal of nursing for potential students and denigrate the value and status of the profession. A growing body of work analyses how nursing is portrayed in popular media, but less research asks nursing students themselves to reflect on this area.

Design. Convergent parallel mixed methods.

Methods. Data were collected in 2011 from surveys of 484 undergraduate nursing students at a large university in New South Wales, Australia, that included demographic data, their viewing habits of medical television programmes and their opinions of how the shows handled nursing ethics and professionalism and the image of nursing on television and nursing role models.

Results. Most students watch medical television programmes. Students who do not speak English at home watched fewer programmes but were more positive about the depictions of professionalism. The qualitative data showed students were concerned that television can have a negative influence on the image of nursing, but they also recognized some educational and recruitment value in television programmes.

Conclusions. It is important for nurses, educators and students to be critically engaged with the image of their profession in society. There is value in engaging more closely with contemporary media portrayals of nursing for students and educators alike.

Keywords: education, English as an additional language, image, nurses, nursing students, recruitment, television

Why is this research or review needed?

- The image of nursing on medical television programmes is important because it plays some role in recruitment and retention for the profession.
- Popular images of nursing are often negative or rely on narrow stereotypes about the profession that can denigrate the appeal of nursing for potential students.
- Although previous research has explored the popular stereotypes around nursing on television, to date there is little research available on the perspectives of students.

What are the three key findings?

- Medical programmes are popular and students believe they portray ethics and professionalism positively, with students who do not speak English at home watching fewer programmes but more positive about professionalism.
- Students would like more modern, visible role models in nursing and feel that medical television can have a negative effect on the public image of nursing.
- Medical programmes can have some pedagogical and recruitment benefits in terms of raising the profile of nursing and offering the scope for education.

How should the findings be used to influence policy/practice/research/education?

- It is important for the nursing profession to continue to critically engage with its public image in popular media to combat negative stereotypes around nursing.
- Recruitment and retention efforts can use role models more effectively in promoting nursing to potential and current students who wish for more visible role models.
- Medical television offers nursing education a wealth of popular and easily accessed material to assist students to explore their own and other people's ideas about nursing.

Introduction

The hospital drama has been a popular staple genre practically since the inception of television. Indeed, 'hospitals seem to hold endless fascination to the viewing public' (Jackson 2009, p. 2249) and are regularly the subject of dramas, serials, reality shows, documentaries, advertising and even comedies. Part of the appeal of the hospital no doubt lies in the range of dramatic human scenarios and assortment of characters that can legitimately be portrayed and explored in the context of the hospital drama. Nurses inhabit hospitals and so are often among the most visible characters in televised accounts of hospital life. Thus, nurses appear frequently on television programmes around

the world in all manner of genres and for a range of purposes. If we assess awareness of and attraction to a profession as being able to be somehow approximated to the volume of television time that is dedicated to it, clearly, nursing performs far better than many other professional groups (Jackson 2009).

Background

Recruitment and retention in nursing have been linked to the image of the profession in society (Cabaniss 2011). Images of nursing in popular media, such as television, can influence how nursing is viewed and potentially both shape and reinforce stereotypes about nursing. These popular stereotypes may enhance or alternatively damage the appeal of nursing for potential students, and commend or denigrate the value and status of the profession.

Despite the visibility of nurses on television, there have continued to be concerns about the ways nursing is represented in popular culture, the accuracy (or otherwise) of such representations (Summers & Summers 2009) and the influence of these televised images on undergraduate nursing students (Czarny *et al.* 2008). Findings by Czarny *et al.* (2008) suggest that most nursing students watch television and that medical dramas are prominent in their viewing habits. Furthermore, they provide an argument that the images and messages imparted through televised medical dramas can form a part of the informal curriculum (Czarny *et al.* 2008).

Although nursing remains greatly dominated by women, the influence of televised representations of nursing has been attributed to the increase in applications into nursing by male students in the UK (Hallam 2002). This increase in male interest has been associated with a long running popular BBC drama, *Casualty*, a show that while emphasizing the skilful aspects of nursing work (Jackson 2009), also highlights men in central nursing roles (Hallam 2002). While there is a growing body of work analysing how nursing is portrayed in popular media, there is less research that asks nursing students themselves to reflect on how the profession is represented on television, or interrogates how the televised images of nursing influence students' own views of nursing recruitment and education.

The study

Aims

The aim of the study was to explore nursing students' perceptions of their profession on television.

Design

This convergent parallel mixed-methods design included a survey with open-ended questions.

Participants

The study took place at a large metropolitan university in Australia and involved purposive sampling of students enrolled in all years of a 3-year undergraduate nursing programme and is part of a larger project that also explored how forensic science students engaged with their professional image in television, which we have reported elsewhere (Weaver *et al.* 2012).

Data collection

Data were collected in 2011. Students were invited to join the study by completing surveys after participating in on-campus tutorials. The surveys collected students' demographic information, viewing habits of nursing-related programmes, recollection of ethical and professional issues on screen, perceptions of realism and sources of information about ethical issues. Although the surveys were based on those developed by Czarny *et al.* (2008) in their study of medical and nursing students in the USA, we modified the format and content to focus on contemporary programmes applicable to the Australian setting.

The qualitative data comprises of students' written answers to a question at the end of the survey that provided further opportunity to share their thoughts on medical television programmes and nursing role models. This article presents the quantitative results first to contextualize the qualitative findings.

Ethical considerations

Data collection procedures adhered to guidelines for ethical research on humans, following approval from the university's human research ethics committee. Interested students were provided with an information sheet explaining the background and purpose of the study and were given the chance to ask questions. An explanation was provided to the students as to how confidentiality would be protected. Participation was voluntary and students' privacy was maintained by assigning codes to student data, which we have used here. Students were recruited into the study by a research team member who was not in a teacher–student relationship with them at the time.

Data analysis

We used descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of respondents. Categorical variables were expressed as frequencies and percentages and continuous variables were expressed as means, standard deviations and ranges. For group comparisons, the chi-squared test was used for categorical variables, such as male/female. Statistical significance was set at a *P* value of <0.05.

The qualitative analysis process was inductive and involved reading the data closely several times, labelling relevant text sections about the different ways students write about how nursing is portrayed in popular culture and refining these labels into themes (Thomas 2006). As Thorne (2000) writes, although there are several elements influencing analysis, such as the particular research question and the data collection methods, the process of developing themes is 'an explicit step in conceptually interpreting the data set as a whole, using specific analytic strategies to transform the raw data into a new and coherent depiction of the thing being studied' (Thorne 2000, p. 68).

Rigour

The qualitative data analysis process is inevitably influenced by the researchers' backgrounds, experience and also theoretical perspectives (Thorne 2000) and we acknowledge that our interpretation of the qualitative data may differ to how others might approach the data. However, the analysis included consultation in the research team to refine the themes and the findings are presented here with quotes to support our interpretation of the data. We have also included data that contradicts our main findings. Although our study took place at one institution, we expect some transferability of our findings to other similar settings given the fact that most of the popular programmes are American and screen globally. In some cases, the quotes from the qualitative data are edited in very minor ways for readability.

Results

The survey was completed by 484 students; just under half of these students were enrolled in Year 1 and most were women. Almost half spoke a language other than English at home and nearly a quarter did not speak English at home. The average age was 27.3 years and over a third had previous work experience in the clinical setting. The demographic characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1.

Television watched

The average number of hours of television watched per week was 17, and the number of hours ranged from 0 to 70. Of the sample, 69% ($n = 335$) have watched medical television programmes. There were no significant differences in the shows watched by students across different years of course enrolment, but students who spoke a language other than English at home were less likely to report watching medical television shows (68% vs. 80%, $P = 0.008$) compared with those who only spoke English at home.

The surveys listed six popular medical television shows and asked students to nominate which programmes they watched and how often they did so. The six programmes were *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scrubs*, *Nurse Jackie*, *Hawthorne* and *Offspring*, chosen because they were screening regularly at the time of the survey, were nursing-focused or were popular anecdotally, but the surveys provided space for students to list other programmes and gave prompts for nine other shows.

The most watched programme for nursing students was *Grey's Anatomy*, with *House* and *Scrubs* the next most popular, based on students who have ever watched the programmes. *RPA*, an Australian medical documentary series, was not included in our six main programmes but was nominated by students as the fourth-most watched programme and the remaining top-10 programmes were *Offspring*, *Nurse Jackie*, *All Saints*, *ER*, *Private Practice* and *Hawthorne* (Figure 1). Of the top five programmes watched, there were no significant differences based on gender with one exception: of the sample, women were more

likely to have ever watched *Grey's Anatomy* than men (59% vs. 39%, $P = 0.001$).

Ethical issues in nursing on TV

The surveys included a list of 14 ethical issues in nursing and asked students if they recalled seeing any storylines involving the topics in medical programmes and over half the sample could recall each element, with Confidentiality the most recalled and Human Experimentation the least recalled issue (Figure 2). When asked how appropriately the topic was handled, the most common rating for all ethical issues was OK.

Students ranked different sources of information for their influence on their understanding of bioethical issues and we combined rankings of 1, 2 and 3 for each element. The television programmes ranked very low (14%) for their influence on students' understanding of bioethical issues. Family had the highest ranking, with almost a third of the sample (62%) ranking family as the number 1, 2 or 3 source for information about ethics. Their School of Nursing had the second-highest ranking, with over half (52%) the students ranking it as 1, 2 or 3. Friends also ranked highly as a source of information for almost half the sample (45%) and more than a third ranked clergy highly (39%). Other sources received lower ratings, including scholarly journals (28%), newspapers and TV news (21% each) and popular magazines (10%). There were no significant differences for information sources based on year, gender or any demographic characteristic except for language spoken at home, with students who did not speak English at home placing less importance on scholarly journals (22% vs. 37% among those who only spoke English at home, $P = 0.012$). Almost half the sample acknowledged discussing ethical and nursing issues on television programmes with their friends and this number increased over the years, with 41% of Year 1, 54% in Year 2 and 61% in Year 3 discussing with friends.

Table 1 Characteristics of nursing students in the sample ($n = 484$).

Variable	
Year of enrolment in the Bachelor of Nursing programme, n (%)	
Year 1	203 (41.9)
Year 2	159 (32.9)
Year 3	122 (25.2)
Age, years; mean (sd) ($n = 466^*$; range: 18–58)	27.3 (8.6)
Gender, n (%)	
Male	83 (17.1)
Female	401 (82.9)
Language spoken at home, n (%)	
English	154 (31.8)
Other than English	110 (22.7)
Both English and non-English	220 (45.5)

*Missing data.

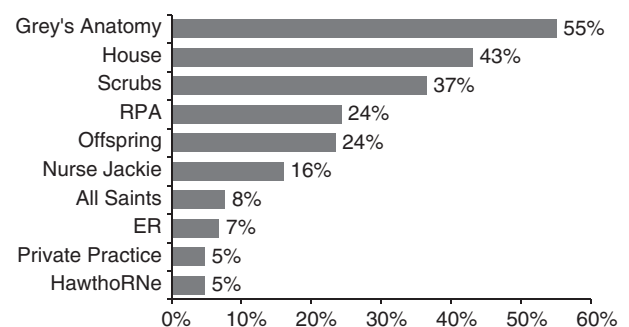


Figure 1 Top 10 medical TV shows watched by nursing students ($n = 484$).

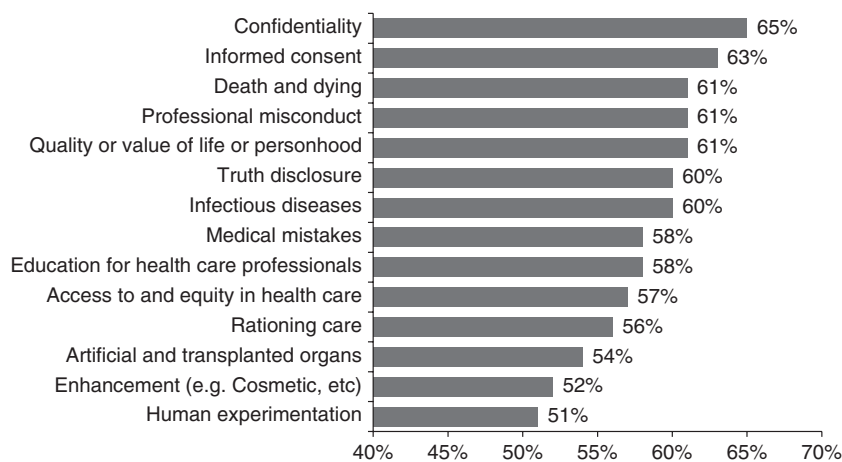


Figure 2 Ethical issues from TV dramas recalled by respondents ($n = 484$).

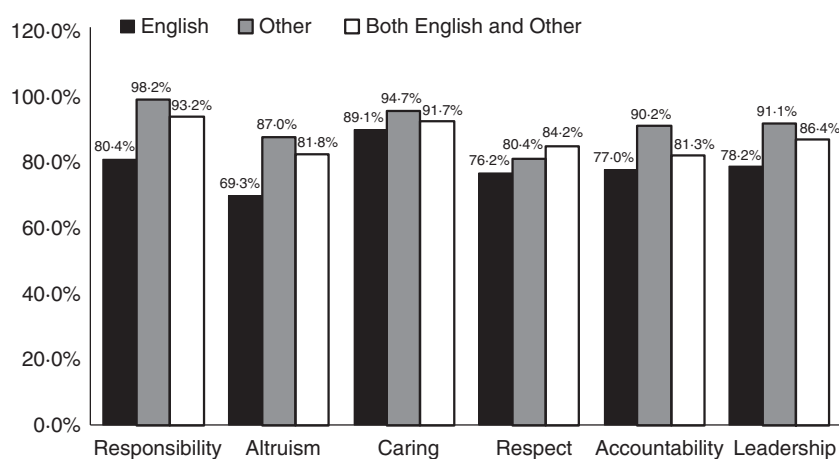


Figure 3 Comparison of positive professional ideals portrayed by TV dramas by language spoken at home of respondents ($n = 312$).

Nursing professional ideals on TV

We listed six professional ideals on the survey and asked students to rate how these were treated on screen (positively or negatively): responsibility, altruism/honesty/integrity, caring and compassion, respect, accountability and leadership. Each ideal was ranked positively by over half the students, but those who did not speak English at home gave a positive ranking to the portrayals of responsibility (98% vs. 80%, $P < 0.001$) and altruism/honesty/integrity (87% vs. 69%, $P < 0.016$) that was significantly higher compared with those who only spoke English at home (Figure 3).

Qualitative data

At the end of the surveys, students could write comments about their perceptions of nursing on television and role models. There were three major themes in this qualitative data relating to different spheres of influence based on the

programmes: (i) 'Not just saying "yes Doctor!" and bringing pans': television and the public image; (ii) 'Need more role models!': television and recruitment; and (iii) 'There is a lot you can learn': television and education.

'Not just saying "yes Doctor!" and bringing pans': television and the public image

Although the quantitative data showed over half the sample giving a positive assessment of how nursing professionalism was portrayed on television, the first theme in the qualitative data was that television nurses are represented in negative ways that can influence how the general public sees the nursing profession. Several students highlighted their perception that television programmes often feature doctors rather than nurses (Student 19) and that doctors are often represented positively and nurses negatively (Student 172) because nurses' skills are not shown. As one student noted, 'Nurses are often not even portrayed in the medical shows and often the doctors tend to do everything which is so wrong and not true' (Student 69). This absence of television

nurses was a common complaint for participants, with participants writing that the programmes are ‘not depicting actual facts about nursing’ (Student 18) and the programmes do not illustrate ‘the actual extent of influence nurses have on patient care, safety and rehabilitation’ (Student 59).

Participants said that the public could be influenced by nursing on television and drew attention to the consequences of negative depictions of nursing because the public can develop a ‘false’ view of the profession (Student 142) where people may believe nurses are simply ‘the doctor’s assistant’ (Student 228). One participant wrote: ‘The drama shows can have a real negative effect on people’s perception of nursing and medical practice’ (Student 26), while another was concerned that the community might think nurses are unimportant or that nurses are ‘just here for entertainment’ (Student 263). Another was critical that ‘Most shows don’t depict nurses as what we really are. People’s views are skewed as they think nurses “don’t do much”, whereas in reality they are amazed at how much hard work we actually do’ (Student 52). Several participants disapproved of the sexual connotations in the programmes, saying that ‘Looking sexy and love affairs are not the reality of acute health facilities’ (Student 23), suggesting that shows emphasizing the characters’ sex lives ‘can affect the nursing profession in some ways; also, people lose their trust in nursing’ (Student 140).

‘Need more role models!’: television and recruitment

The negative stereotypes of nursing on television identified by students meant that role modelling was a concern for some participants, who in some cases linked this to recruitment. As one student wrote:

I find in medical television shows, or at least in *House*, nurses aren’t portrayed prominently and when they are depicted, they are presented as not being as important as Drs, therefore, there aren’t many nursing role models. (Student 5)

Participants did agree that nursing role models are vital, whether fictional or otherwise. One student raised the concern that ‘There are no modern nursing role models, marketing and awareness needs to be increased’ so that the public was more aware of nursing (Student 167). As another wrote:

Nursing role models play a large/pivotal role in guiding nursing students and aiding, shaping and students/junior nurses. Such role models need to be more publicized to gain attention from such media outlets to better address those who shape nursing. (Student 79)

However, although many participants called for ‘more nurse role models!’ rather than screen doctors (Student 230), others pointed to the positive benefits of television for recruitment, suggesting television role models can positively influence recruitment to the profession. As one participant explained, nursing role models on television ‘did help me make up my mind to become a nurse’ despite being unrealistic (Student 267). Another noted that nursing television programmes are ‘inspiring’ and ‘actually made me want to enter nursing’ (Student 337).

‘There is a lot you can learn’: television and education

Despite the quantitative data suggesting television rates very low as a source of influence for students, some students did highlight their belief that medical television programmes could offer educational aspects (Student 326). One participant wrote that ‘there is a lot you can learn from watching medical television shows that you can implement in your study or at work’ (Student 197), while another believed they were educational and there should be more programmes (Student 203). For one student, television shows ‘give us good extra knowledge’ (Student 399).

Other comments also highlighted the educational element of television, but saw this in medical documentaries rather than dramas: ‘Medical television like *RPA* is educating and interesting. You can actually see the application of theories into clinical practice’ (Student 250). Indeed, many comments displayed a preference for reality programmes such as *RPA*, with the reasoning that documentary series ‘take things seriously and accurately, whereas [drama] series or “stories” are not realistic at all’ (Student 228). Other students showed a cynical recognition of the demands of television, with one student writing that positive-nursing examples on drama programmes ‘may not make for interesting television’ (Student 96). However, there was a clear recognition that television could have an educational role in its ability to bring life to nursing theory.

Discussion

Our findings differ in some ways from previous research about television watching in nursing and other disciplines. Although a relatively high number (69%) of students watched medical television programmes in our study, this is rather less than previous research showing that between 80% and 90% of students watch their profession on television in the USA (Czarny *et al.* 2008) and in Australia (Weaver & Wilson 2011, Weaver *et al.* 2012). Previous American research suggests that medical students are more likely than nursing students to watch *House* (Czarny *et al.*

2008) and our study similarly shows that nursing students favour *Grey's Anatomy* over *House*. We note that both programmes feature few nurses, if any and that nurse-centred programmes such as *Nurse Jackie* and *Hawthorne* either screen irregularly on Australian free-to-air networks or not at all. Therefore, fewer students are likely to even realize such programmes exist and this perhaps influenced our findings that students said that nurses were relatively invisible on screen.

As it is evident that nursing students can develop a degree of professional identity before commencing the nursing programme (Adams *et al.* 2006), it was encouraging to find that nursing students in our study were aware that many of the television images were incorrect and misleading and depicted poor nursing role models. There were several students who expressed a need for more role models in the clinical learning environment and on screen. Although nurse academics may be influenced by 21st century nursing heroines and role models (Darbyshire 2011), these may not be appropriate for nursing students and thus nurses need to work with the media to create programmes depicting clinically current nursing role models.

The findings about students identifying negative stereotypes of television nurses confirm previous research about narrow, negative images of nurses (Kalisch & Kalisch 1987, Summers & Summers 2009, Darbyshire 2010). Several of the media images of nurses examined by Bridges (1990) are still being perpetuated by the media, such as the doctor's handmaiden and the sex symbol. There was very strong evidence in our study that students wanted more visible, accurate and realistic depictions of nursing on television because they believed that these current images are important in informing the public of the assertive, intelligent modern nurse and also how current, skilled nursing care provides for patients and hospitals.

For some students in the study, medical television programmes helped them decide to become a nurse. This provides evidence for previous research that the media image of a nurse has an impact on recruitment (Kalisch *et al.* 2007), with a positive nursing image said to be important in recruiting high-calibre students into nursing (Cabaniss 2011). Conversely and although contentious, some nurses contend that the demeaning depiction of nurses in *ER* has contributed to the serious nursing shortage in the USA (Lenzer 2003) and certainly the students in our study believed that the public image of nursing was denigrated at times by its television representations.

Several students noted that much of the television media was inaccurate, unrealistic and lacking fact. Nurses have, in fact, challenged the authenticity of some of the television

dramas, leading to changes (Buresh & Gordon 1995). It is therefore essential that nurse advisors to these programmes are competent and current, an area that has been questioned with regard to *ER* medical consultants (Brindley & Needham 2009). Importantly, as the content of television programmes has been shown to have an impact on viewers (Brodie *et al.* 2001), many of whom have no professional background (Kwong & Chow 2010), it is vital that, from a health promotion perspective, the content is as accurate and science- and evidence-based as possible.

One of the unexpected findings in this study was the difference in viewing habits and perceptions between students who speak English at home and those who do not. Our results show that students who do not speak English at home watch less television, watch less medical shows and recall fewer ethical issues but rate the professional ideals on television more positively and are more likely to be influenced by clergy than scholarly journal articles as sources of bioethical information. Students who speak only English at home were more likely to watch more television, watch more medical television shows and be more critical about how professionalism is portrayed on screen. Students with English as an additional language (EAL) are encouraged to watch more television programmes as a strategy to improve their language skills (Olson 2012) and thus it was an unexpected finding that they watch less television. It is known that overseas nurses can find entry into Australian culture difficult (Jackson 1996, Konno 2006) and as most of the television programmes do not reflect the cultural diversity of students with EAL they may prefer not to watch them. Similarly, although many programmes these days have minor characters with non-Anglo ethnicity, there are few leading characters to identify with as role models. More research is required in this area.

There are several implications for nursing education. Television programmes offer educators the possibility of easily accessible resources that are very likely to engage students in learning, whether or not these programmes reflect nurses and nursing positively or negatively. It has been shown that television medical dramas are of use when teaching both improper and proper ethical conduct (Kwong & Chow 2010). As a teaching strategy, case studies from television may also encourage students who do not speak English at home to watch more television and have the additional benefit of assisting to improve their language skills (Olson 2012). Conversely, other research criticizes using television in education, such as Ward and Summers (2008), who point out that the absence of nursing staff on screen makes using such excerpts problematic, although we note that several nurse-focused television programmes have

aired since their paper (*Nurse Jackie*, Hawthorne, and Mercy). However, it is important that nurse educators are able to discuss with students the origins and consequences of negative nursing stereotypes (Jinks & Bradley 2004) and that they reinforce positive images of nurses as intelligent professionals, engaged in skilled nursing care and being pivotal to obtaining positive outcomes for their patients (Jackson 2009). Many students in our study found the reality medical programmes highly interesting and educational and these particular programmes may also be effective to provoke discussions around more sensitive topics.

One strength of this study is in paying attention to how nursing students perceive the image of their profession on television. Although much previous research deals with the popular image of nursing across a range of media (Kalisch *et al.* 2007, Kelly *et al.* 2012), less work has been done to explore medical television from the perspective of students. More than this, however, this study provides some evidence of the extent to which nursing students engage with medical television shows. The presentation of quantitative and qualitative data is a second strength, given that qualitative data enhances and elaborates on numerical data in important ways.

Limitations of the study

Although we have measured nursing students' viewing of medical programmes to some degree in this study, further work is needed to further explore the complex interactions between students and images of nursing in popular culture. This study was conducted at only one site in a university in New South Wales, so its relevance to other settings could be explored in other similar studies locally and internationally. The qualitative data were drawn from one open-ended question on the surveys and open-ended survey questions often are sparse and lack the context that could lead to greater analytical depth (Jackson & Trochim 2002). Therefore, other qualitative methods such as interviewing, focus groups or participant journals might reveal important data that illuminate this topic further, and extending both qualitative and quantitative approaches to other settings. Furthermore, focusing on students who do not speak English at home could be a worthwhile endeavour in seeking to understand the potential differences in how they engage with medical television compared with students who speak English in their home environment. Finally, given we found women are more likely to watch *Grey's Anatomy* than men, which reflects other studies (Czarny *et al.* 2008) and given that others have also focused on the gender implications of television characters (Hallam 2002) for recruitment, the issue of gender, nursing and television is a fruitful avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Although nursing students believe that medical television programmes can have positive educational and recruitment outcomes, they also note that nurses are often invisible on screen and when present, are represented by outdated and negative stereotypes. Our study showed most nursing students watch medical television programmes and that many desire more positive role models, particularly depicting the clinical learning environment that reflects nursing in the 21st century. As clinicians, educators, academics and managers, we have a responsibility 'to get out there and make the changes happen' (Darbyshire 2010, p. 60) to our media image.

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Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

Author contributions

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria [recommended by the IC-MJE (http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html)]:

- substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data;
- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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