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TV NURSES Often HURT More *than* HEAL

BY HILA J. SPEAR



We live in an era where image and the marketing of image has never been more important. While nurses can certainly maintain that the core business of nursing is caring for the sick and assuring the health and well being of people, nurses would be foolish to ignore the importance of nursing's image.

While channel surfing one Sunday evening, I came across what, at first glance, appeared to be a promo for informed consent about abortion. But as the dialogue continued, I

discovered I was watching the season premiere of the CBS drama *Cold Case*, which aired on September 25, 2005.

The person talking about abortion was an actor playing the role of a school nurse, "Nurse Laura." She was overly dramatic, uncaring and insensitive as she explained to an already distraught teenage boy how abortion ends a life. The "nurse" reinforced the information by thrusting pictures of aborted babies into the hands of the young father-to-be. Based on the crazy nurse's scare tactics, the boy and his girlfriend changed their minds about

abortion. Other characters in this episode mocked the school nurse, her tactics and her pro-life view.

Beyond the irresponsible characterization of a pro-life nurse as an unprofessional, hard-hearted individual, the media is fraught with offensive and disturbing images of nurses. I recall reading or hearing about nurses labeled by terms such as "sex symbol," "seductress" and "naughty nurse," or lampooned as



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buxom nurses dressed in tightly fitted white uniforms.¹ Sadly, these sex-oriented and other negative stereotypical views of nurses persist. To confirm this, one need only watch a television episode of *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, a variety of sitcoms, and tasteless commercials and magazine ads that include "nurse" characters. Thankfully, the shampoo commercial that depicted a female nurse in an overtly sexual and irresponsible way was short-lived due to protests of concerned nurses.² Unfortunately, nurses often are characterized by the media as immoral, less than bright, selfish and concerned more about their personal lives than about providing safe and appropriate care for their patients. On TV, if a nurse is mistaken for a physician, it is a compliment, but if a physician is mistaken for a nurse, it is a major insult.

Although many media depictions are unflattering, sometimes nurses are presented as strong and intelligent. During the early days of *ER*, the nurse character Carol Hathaway modeled positive qualities of nursing such as compassion, leadership and assertiveness. In the off-Broadway play *Wit*, Emma Thompson played the role of a nurse who demonstrated professionalism, caring and sensitivity as she advocated for the unique needs of a dying patient. These positive characterizations are encouraging. Nevertheless, they are not the norm.

IT IS NOT JUST ENTERTAINMENT

There is ample research evidence demonstrating that the media is a powerful force transcending entertainment. For example, observation of violent and sexually oriented productions can increase risk for aggression and adversely affect sexual behaviors and attitudes.³ Of particular

Media portrayals of nursing typically are inaccurate, offering inferior images of the profession.

concern to nursing is the reality that how others perceive nurses is impacted by their consumption of media-inspired representations. Researchers Phillip Derbyshire and Suzanne Gordon emphasize that public beliefs about the importance of nursing are affected by media-driven images. They point out:

We live in an era where image and the marketing of image has never been more important. While nurses can certainly maintain that the core business of nursing is caring for the sick and assuring the health and well being of people, nurses would be foolish to ignore the importance of nursing's image.⁴

Other researchers have attributed attrition rates in nursing school to the misconceptions students had about nursing based on their media-generated views of the profession.⁵ Similarly, many believe that the increasingly criticized dramatic series *ER* is a contributing factor to the nursing shortage because of its weekly broadcast of inaccurate and negative portrayals of nurses.⁶

Historically, nursing shortages in America have been linked to the poor image of nursing.⁷ More specifically, public perceptions of nursing have been correlated with nurses' self-image, job performance and turnover intentions.⁸ Considering the reality that the nursing workforce is aging, with fewer young people entering the field,⁹ the public denigration of nurses and the profession

is especially troubling. To provide recruitment support, in 2002 Johnson and Johnson launched a national Campaign for Nurses' Future.¹⁰ This ongoing project involves, in part, television ads that portray caring images of nurses and affirm nursing as a desirable profession. Although it will take more than the Johnson and Johnson campaign to significantly mitigate the dwindling number of those choosing nursing as a career, surveyors recently reported that this initiative has successfully influenced some young people to become nurses.¹¹

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIAN NURSES SPEAK OUT

Whether or not you view television programs or other media enterprises that portray nursing or the values of Christian nurses in a negative way, it is important to convey your opinion. You have the option of turning off the television or not reading offensive print media. But why not make an effort to be a positive influence rather than ignore the ever-growing presence of negative media fare. Nurses need to speak out and to be proactive about who they are and what they do.¹²

As Christians, we view nursing as a special calling and a ministry. When others misrepresent and disparage nursing, we should take notice. The media is an influential and powerful source that can be used for good or evil. Why not be a voice for good? Franky Schaeffer's book *A Time for*

Negative images of nursing contribute to poor public perception and recruitment.

Anger, published more than twenty years ago, is still applicable today. He referred to the media's "growing mania for power and their discrimination against Christians and traditional Judeo-Christian ethics."¹³ Schaeffer asserted that as followers of Christ, we should reveal the truth and confront the sophisticated debasement of Christianity and anti-Christian sentiment rampant in our society. Jesus told his followers to be the salt of the earth and to let their light shine before men (Mt 5:13-16). Is it possible that this could involve Christian nurses speaking out for respectful and truthful media representation, both of Christ and of the profession? Shouldn't we be committed to perpetuating a legacy of quality care and service to others?

WAYS TO TAKE ACTION

In this age of technology and instantaneous communication, an effort must be made to influence and change the less than nurse-friendly media. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Begin with prayer. Ask God to show you where and how he wants you to speak out about nursing and make a difference.
- Be informed. The *Center for Nursing Advocacy* (see Web Resources) is a useful and current online resource that provides examples of unacceptable and positive nurse-related media content. The Center provides contact information for producers, writers and sponsors of nursing material.
- Send an e-mail or write a letter to your local newspaper(s), community newsletter or popular magazines

when negative or inaccurate media portrayal of nurses occurs.

- Proactively educate the public! Write accurate, positive articles or letters about nursing for secular and Christian publications; educate others about the multiple career options available to nurses.
- Contact networks, producers and other individuals who sanction poor images of nurses.
- Reinforce and encourage positive media renderings of nurses and nursing by expressing appreciation to those responsible for positive portrayals.

To help influence the public's perception of nursing, engage in endeavors that reflect a positive image of the nursing profession. Promote National Nurses Week in your church. Visit schools to inform students about the rewarding, meaningful and invaluable work nurses do. Volunteer at public events to provide first-aid and ask event organizers to recognize nurses and their contribution. And always remember to be the best nurse you can—caring, competent, professional—providing nursing care just as you would if Jesus were your patient (Mt 25:31-36).

Rather than discuss your frustration about how nurses are demeaned by the media with your colleagues or with nursing students in the classroom, go to the source. Nurses need to make an effort to change the media culture and break down negative stereotypes. To promote the profession and entice the next generation to choose nursing as a career, we need to make our voices heard. ■JCN

WEB RESOURCES

- Center for Nursing Advocacy - <http://www.nurseadvocacy.org/>
- Discover Nursing - <http://www.discovernursing.com/default.aspx>
- Center for American Nurses - <http://www.ana.org/center/index.htm>

¹Philip Kalisch and Beatrice Kalisch, *The Changing Image of the Nurse* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison Wesley, 1987).

²Center for Nursing Advocacy, "Procter & Gamble Pulls Clairol Shampoo Commercial and Apologizes to Nurses, June 11, 2003." Accessed May 16, 2006, at http://www.nursingadvocacy.org/news/2003jun11_clairol.html.

³Tina L. Cheng, Ruth A. Brenner, Joseph L. Wright, Hari Cheryl Sachs, Patricia Moyer and Malla R. Rao, "Children's Violent Television Viewing: Are Parents Monitoring?" *Pediatrics*, 114, no. 1 (2004): 94-99, and American Academy of Pediatrics, "Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens," Accessed February 21, 2006, at <http://www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm>.

⁴Philip Derbyshire and Suzanne Gordon, "Exploring Popular Images and Representations of Nurses and Nursing," in *Professional Nursing: Concepts, Issues and Challenges*, eds. John Daly Sandra Speedy, Debra Jackson, Vickie Lambert and Clinton Lambert, 69-92 (New York: Springer: New York, 2005).

⁵Kathryn Godfrey, "Don't Believe the Hype," *Nursing Times*, 96, no. 28 (2000): 28-29, and David A. Brodie, Gavin J. Andrews, Justin P. Andrews, Gail B. Thomas, Josephine Wong and Lorna Rixon, "Perceptions of Nursing: Confirmation, Change and the Student Experience," *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 41 (2004): 721-733.

⁶J. Lenzer, "ER Blamed for Nursing Shortage," *British Medical Journal*, 327, no. 7426 (2003): 1294.

⁷Heather Janiszewski Goodin, "The Nursing Shortage in the United States of America: An Integrative Review of the Literature," *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43, no. 4 (August 2003): 335-343.

⁸Miyuki Takase, Phillip Maude and Elizabeth Manias, "Impact of the Perceived Public Image of Nursing on Nurses' Work Behaviour," *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 53, no. 3 (February 2006): 333-343.

⁹American Association of Colleges of Nursing, "Nursing Shortage Resource." Accessed February 20, 2006, at http://www.aacn.nche.edu/Media/shortage_resource.htm.

¹⁰Johnson & Johnson Health Care Systems Inc., "Discover Nursing." Accessed February 20, 2006, at <http://www.discovernursing.com>.

¹¹Peter I. Buerhaus, Karen Donelan, Linda Norman and Robert Dittus, "Nursing Students' Perceptions of a Career in Nursing and Impact of a National Campaign Designed to Attract People into the Nursing Profession," *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 21, no. 2 (2005): 75-83.

¹²Suzanne Gordon and Bernice Buresh, "Speak Out Loud for Nursing," *Nursing Management*, 7, no. 10 (2001): 14-17.

¹³Franky Schaeffer, *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 41.