TV Nurses: Promoting a Positive Image of Nursing?

Abstract: It's understood that medical dramas are meant to entertain, not serve as documentaries. Nevertheless, media-driven messages are powerful, influencing the culture and collective mindset. This article evaluates current images of nurses in the media and challenges nurses to engage in professional and public service designed to promote a positive media and public image of nursing.

Keywords: image of nursing, nurse promotion, nurse recruitment, television nurses
Television (TV) has done little to convey a positive, realistic image of nurses and what nurses actually do. Over past decades, nurses have been depicted as angels of mercy, mere handmaids, or sexually charged characters more interested in personal relationships with physicians than attending to patient care. Established medical dramas such as Grey’s Anatomy, House, and Private Practice pay little attention to the role of the nurse. For the most part, nurses are nonexistent.

One Grey’s Anatomy story line did include an operating room nurse who caught the eye and sexual attention of the heartthrob physician referred to as “Dr. McDreamy.” In another episode, one of the young residents lamented the fact that she was losing her best scrub nurse due to downsizing. On House, Gregory House, the main physician character quickly called for a nurse to clean up after he toppled a patient’s bedside tray, indicating nurses were at his disposal to perform tasks he did not want to do. Nurses are routinely marginalized as less than vital members of the healthcare team and portrayed as sex objects or subservient to physicians.

NEW NURSING?

Recently, TNT, CBS, and HBO networks launched new TV shows that include strong nurse characters in leading roles. Comparing the role of the nurse played by Zena Bethune in the 1962 TV program, The Nurses, to today’s HawthoRNe, Nurse Jackie, and Mercy. Nurse Veronica, at first glance it seems we’ve come a long way. Nurses are no longer portrayed as meek handmaids and robotic physician helpers. However, although the production of programs that portray nurses in a more positive light is heartening, serious challenges remain. What is nursing facing from three of the newest additions of prime-time medical shows that include nurses as primary lead characters?

Nurse Jackie

Nurse Jackie is smart, assertive, knowledgeable, confident, and has excellent assessment skills. Unfortunately, the fact that she is assertive and intelligent is overshadowed by unethical and self-destructive behavior. She has a foul mouth, is promiscuous, is dependent on pain medications due to a back injury, routinely snorts cocaine, and falsifies documents to deem an accident victim an organ donor.

Jackie’s character fits with notion of the cerebral “naughty nurse.” She manages to maintain control of her professional and personal life while she succumbs to a hedonistic view of sexuality and relationships. If this character actually existed, she would be fired with recommendations for counseling and enrollment in a detoxification program. Her immoral lifestyle and profane mode of communication is not surprising considering current culture. However, our morals and ethics do not, or should not, change to adapt to an ever-degenerating cultural milieu (Romans 12:2).

Although obviously troubled, flawed, and less than a positive role model for nursing, Nurse Jackie generates the notion that a nurse has the intellect and fortitude to make tough decisions related to life and death. Furthermore, Jackie brings out that nurses are not hesitant to challenge physicians to promote better outcomes for patients.

HawthoRNe

Christine Hawthorne, RN, is the chief nurse officer (CNO) described by coworkers as “sassy, with plucky determination.” Due to the death of her husband, Hawthorne is a hard-working single parent of a teenage daughter. Hints of a possible romantic relationship with a physician were evident early in the series. After much hesitation, Hawthorne and the physician consummate the relationship.

Hawthorne is a great nurse, but some HawthoRNe episodes are less than realistic. What is promoted as caring is almost over the top sentimentality that romanticizes the role of the nurse. Nurse Hawthorne attempts to encapsulate the qualities of an administrator, nurse leader, and expert clinician (across a number of specialties) into one character. For example, although she is the CNO, Hawthorne often is in scrubs administering direct care in the Emergency Department (ED). After a long day of crises in the ED, she makes a house call to a patient and provides the family with a psychiatric-oriented consult. Although other nurse cast members are presented as caring and somewhat intelligent, their conversations are laced with coarse language, profanity, and sexual innuendo. Regrettably, in the same way medical dramas offer unrealistic representations of “Super Docs,” HawthoRNe relays an unworkable view of “Super-Nursing” that is too idealistic and exhausting.

Mercy

Veronica is the main RN character in the TV show Mercy. The online promo for Mercy states, “Some nurses give shots, Veronica calls them.” She is a nurse grappling to adjust to civilian life after a tour of duty in Iraq. Nurse Veronica and her husband are in counseling because of his infidelity. Although the husband is struggling with his moral...
failure, Veronica chooses not to disclose that she had an affair with a physician. Although her service to her country is inspiring, she does not exude a sense of confidence or professionalism.

Nurse Veronica’s character is needy and depressed. However, she does have moments of assertiveness and bold action. For example, when a physician ceases resuscitation efforts on a young female and says, “She’s gone,” Nurse Veronica pushes the physician aside and immediately resumes resuscitation while the passive physician looks on. The patient is revived and recovers. In this scenario, Nurse Veronica is the ultimate advocate for the patient, saving the young woman’s life.

JUST ENTERTAINMENT?

Although negative portrayals of nursing in the media continue to present challenges as an “it’s just entertainment” mentality prevails, the recent debut of TV dramas that focus on nursing is encouraging. Nurses are coming to the forefront and some story lines portray nurses as caring, independent, and intelligent (Gordon, 2009). Of the nurses in the new nursing-oriented programs, Hawthorne is the most stable. Although Hawthorne’s character borders on being annoying with her “I can do all things nursing” and a sometimes self-righteous attitude, she possesses positive role model qualities such as dedication, leadership, and a strong work ethic. It appears that producers and sponsors are listening to criticism levied against the media’s less than favorable treatment of nurses. Despite the flaws, moral shortcomings, and lapses in realism, the fact that TV nurses possess intelligence and critical-thinking skills is a step in the right direction. Susanne Gordon, an author who studies and writes about the image of nursing, states, “Even though TV is supposed to be just entertainment, shows like Nurse Jackie and even HawthoRNes, can help convince the public that nurses matter” (p. 2).

To be fair, other medical shows portray physicians in a negative way. For example, the dramas Grey’s Anatomy, Private Practice, and the comedy Scrubs characterize physicians as promiscuous and unprofessional. Unfortunately, most often physician- and nurse-oriented stories tend to focus more on intimate relationships and sexual escapades rather than mutual respect, professional collaboration, and patient care. Whether a drama or a comedy, sex sells and is an ever-present theme across medically oriented TV programs in general.

A CALL TO ACTION

What can nurses do to promote a positive and realistic role of the nurse? Christian nurses can advocate for moral clarity in the media and public images of nursing, and live an ethical life both publicly and privately. Our morals and ethics do not—or should not—change to adapt to an ever-degenerating culture.

Nurses need to tell our story. We all have stories that capture the essence of what is it to be a nurse. “Storytelling is a meaningful way to enlighten others about the practice and value of nursing” (Spear, 2002, p. 65). Educate by sharing exemplars of practice that illustrate the essence of nursing. As you share, differentiate nursing from medicine. These professions are inter-related and critically important to healthcare and the promotion of positive patient outcomes, but nursing is distinctly different. Virginia Henderson, one of the first to differentiate nursing from medicine, provided a classic definition of nursing that focuses on what still remains consistent with hallmarks of nursing practice:

The unique function of the nurse is to assist the individual, sick or well, in the performance of those activities contributing to health or its recovery (or to peaceful death) that he would perform unaided if he had the necessary strength, will or knowledge. And to do this in such a way as to help him gain independence as rapidly as possible. (Henderson, 1966, p. 15)

Nurses can dispel the notion that the ultimate achievement for a healthcare professional is to become a physician. Nursing is not “second best.” Compassionate presence, skillfully ministering to patients in their time of greatest need by day or by night, is the most rewarding work. Nurses have opportunities for a wide range of practice within the field—as staff nurses, managers, clinical nurse specialists, nurse practitioners, nurse educators, researchers, or administrators.

SPEAK OUT

Here are specific ways nurses can promote a positive image of nursing:

1. Maintain a prayer-guided and Holy Spirit-inspired lifestyle. As Christian nurses we can be part of promoting a positive and wholesome image of nursing. Consider your workplace: how you relate to your patients, and how you relate and interact with your nurse and physician colleagues? Do you find yourself letting down your guard and laughing at inappropriate jokes? What about engaging in gossip? Be a consistent and positive witness for Christ in your personal and professional life.

2. Consider your professional work ethic and view your caring for patients and families as ministry. Go the extra mile to provide the
best quality care (Psalm 90:17; Colossians 3:22-24). Recently I was a patient in a major medical center. From a patient perspective, it was obvious which nurses were knowledgeable about their area of practice, displayed a sincere sense of caring, and were dedicated to their profession. It was also clearly evident that some nurses had a less than caring attitude and did not aspire to the provision of compassionate, quality care. I did not feel as safe or comfortable with the nurses who came across as impatient and uncaring. Bad nurses don’t inspire confidence or help recruit into the profession.

3. Keep informed and up to date about your area of specialization; subscribe to and read professional nursing journals.

4. Voice both positive and negative opinions of media depictions of nurses (write/call producers, sponsors, writers). Acknowledge and express appreciation for positive portrayals, and clearly articulate concern about content and story lines that disparage nurses and present the profession in an unrealistic or unflattering way. Access information about nurses in the media and related contact information via The Truth About Nursing Web site (http://www.truthaboutnurs.org/) (Kennedy, 2009), Saving Lives: Why the Media’s Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk provides relevant information regarding how nurses are depicted in various media along with practical ways to champion a positive, authentic image of the nurse (Summers & Summers, 2010). This work “clearly delineates how ubiquitous negative portrayals of nursing in today’s media, particularly three common stereotypes of nurses—the ‘Naughty Nurse,’ the ‘Angel,’ and the ‘Battle Axe’” (Brown, 2009, p. 3).

5. Write editorials about the contributions nurses and the profession make to the health and well-being of society. Be involved at the community, state, and federal levels related to health policy and nursing concerns. This brings nursing to the forefront as a bona fide and involved profession. Despite the less than positive media images of nursing, the public respects nurses. For the eighth consecutive year a Gallup poll found that nurses are the most trusted profession in America (American Nurses Association, 2009).

6. Talk about the profession of nursing and personal practice experiences within community settings such as schools, churches, social events, and volunteer organizations. Be a guest speaker at school “Career Days.” Students considering options for their future professions would benefit from hearing about the field of nursing.

7. Educate school guidance counselors about the nursing profession and opportunities for career development. School counselors tend to encourage bright college-bound students who are interested in health careers into medicine, not nursing (Ferris, 2001). The various educational paths to become a nurse lend to confusion about whether or not nursing is a profession and what the differences are between educational preparation (Spear, 2003). Educating counselors is a way to promote a positive and realistic image of nursing.

8. Be creative! Write a children’s book that promotes a positive image of nursing, such as Jill Learns About Nurses Around the Town (Thomas, 2010), or a novel or novella with a nurse as a central character such as Eleanor Sullivan’s series about the head nurse of the Intensive Care Unit at St. Teresa’s Hospital, Monika Everhardt (Sullivan, 2002, 2004, 2009). Books about nursing could inform in a positive way and plant seeds to inspire young people to consider entering the nursing profession.

SALT AND LIGHT

Determine to be an advocate for moral clarity and a positive image of nursing. There is power in speaking with one voice. It may seem daunting at times to swim upstream against the media-saturated culture that increasingly shuts out God and Christian values. Even so, it is our calling as Christians to be salt and light in a world that is in need of Christ’s love (Matthew 5:13-16). Furthermore, as Christian nurses, we have unique opportunities to model a positive image of nursing with our nurse colleagues, other healthcare professionals, our patients, and the community. We can serve as the hands and feet of Jesus in thought and deed. Be vigilant. “Nurses need to make an effort to change the media culture and break down negative stereotypes. In order to promote the profession and entice the next generation to choose nursing as a career, we need to make our voices heard” (Spear, 2006, p. 34).