What does nursing look like?

What students say about the effects of fictional nurses on their reality
The fictional nurses on TV and in the movies are just that—fictional. But they do influence how the public perceives who nurses are and what nurses do. The public gives nurses high ratings for being ethical and trustworthy, but nursing is low on the list of professions that people find desirable or wish to pursue.\textsuperscript{1,2} The public has a widespread acceptance of nursing in general, but a limited understanding of what nursing roles exist beyond the routine tasks.\textsuperscript{1,3}

Both the fictional portrayal and the public perception of nurses clearly affect whether young men and women choose nursing as their profession. They also affect nursing students who believe the portrayal of nursing on television and in the movies has led the public to see it as a profession in crisis and as an unattractive career in a physician-centric world, where nurses only follow orders.\textsuperscript{4}

**Image and the nursing shortage**

Today, we face a nursing shortage that will affect every U.S. citizen in some way. The shortage may mean higher medical costs, less care for a loved one in the healthcare system, or an inability to receive needed care.

Nurses are leaving the profession in unprecedented numbers partly because of the aging workforce, but also because many other professions offer more pay, better hours, and greater benefits. Today, nursing is struggling to keep its most talented and skilled nurses.

The long-term effects of the changes in the healthcare delivery system in the 1980s also contribute to the shortage. Two decades ago, nurses were seen as expendable. Hospitals replaced them with people who lacked a higher education and were willing to work for less money doing nursing tasks that hospital administrators thought were unimportant.\textsuperscript{5} By the time administrators realized the importance of nurses, a vacuum had been created in the profession.

So what does this have to do with the perception of nursing? During a critical nursing shortage, perceptions of the profession are extremely important. If nursing is portrayed accurately, the profession can draw people who want to pursue an engaging, challenging, and rewarding career that involves a high level of commitment and service to others. Nursing needs to be correctly depicted in the media, so men and women discover that it’s a well-paid, high-tech career offering a variety of employment choices seldom found in other professions.

Part of the problem with the image of nursing—and thus, with recruitment into our largely female profession—is the gender stereotype. Gender stereotypes may accurately reflect a certain individual’s or group’s behavior, but they may be so simplistic that they are inaccurate.\textsuperscript{6} This inaccurate simplicity is apparent in the portrayals of men in the fictional realms of television and the movies.

Nursing advocates want more men to enter the profession, but only about 5% of U.S. nurses are male.\textsuperscript{6} That percentage hasn’t changed much in the last 10 years. Again, public perception plays a role. The public sees men as not having the nature to become nurses. Most experts believe that the stereotype of nursing as a female-oriented profession is part of the problem, and only recently have recruitment strategies been aimed at attracting men.\textsuperscript{7}

**What male students say**

In a 2005 study on the image of nursing, 14 male and female students were asked about the fictional image of nursing on television and in the movies.\textsuperscript{8} (See “What nursing students say about the portrayals and perceptions of nursing.”) Responses from male students suggest that fictional nursing is still steeped in the female tradition. Here are a few responses from male nursing students:

“….I can tell you as a guy getting into nursing, I definitely want to see that anything with nursing represented to the public involves male nurses. If all they do is keep showing women, it won’t help anything….”

“….I don’t want anybody to ever ask me again if I’m going to be a doctor once I’m done being a nurse. Or, if I want to be a Physician’s Assistant (PA) after I’m done being a nurse. You know, it is just ridiculous to think that way…”

“….I don’t want anybody to ever ask me again if I’m going to be a doctor once I’m done being a nurse. If all they do is keep showing women, it won’t help anything….”

“The public sees a man who is a nurse, and . . . . thinks, oh, he must be nurturing to a point. But they also think...
What female students say

Nursing has been viewed as a woman’s profession since Florence Nightingale’s time, though men were the first nurses dating back to the Crusades and Knights Templar. In historical literature, men are favored as nurses because they are considered better suited to leadership and administrative positions. Female nurses may be marginalized because they are seen as better prepared to be the caring patient advocates who remain at the bedside, delivering care that is traditionally considered women’s work.

Female nursing students’ responses to questions regarding the public’s perception of nursing weren’t so different from those of male students. Here are a few statements from female nursing students:

- “I think the public’s perception of nursing comes from its motherly role, taking care of people and that sort of thing.”
- “I think the public probably thinks that TV has dramatized nursing a little bit.”
- “Some people might see it as a whole bunch of work and not a lot of recognition.”
- “The general perception of nurses is that they give you a pill and fluff your pillow.”
- “I think the public still sees us as order followers.”
- “I don’t see enough on the shows where nurses are really out in the community and doing nursing.”
- “They [the public] think of nurses as just doing dirty work in a hospital.”
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Public’s view

“What do you think the media portrays?”

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Career choices

“Tell me about your career plans.”

- “The media has impacted where I want to work.”
- “They [television and movies] target the areas where I want to work, like the emergency department or intensive care unit.”
- “I like trauma and feel television has influenced where I want to work.”
- “I think the media has really influenced me. I like that kind of on-the-edge, different, unique specialty.”
- “I know from watching ER that I never want to work in that area.”

Nursing recruitment

“Could you tell me about why you might choose or not choose to enter nursing school?”

- “I am sure there has been a boost of nursing applicants and people trying to get into nursing school because of the images on television.”
- “I think the media makes the job look exciting and fun.”
- “I think men might like that there are a lot of women in nursing.”
- “I feel the images of nursing do not help recruit people into the field because nursing is portrayed as a degrading field.”
- “The most positive things you see about nursing are commercials.”
- “I feel the media shows nursing school as easy and something you can do overnight. I think movies like Meet the Parents don’t help people think of nursing.”
- “I really don’t see a lot that would encourage a man to become a nurse from the media portrayals.”

What female students say

Nursing has been viewed as a woman’s profession since Florence Nightingale’s time, though men were the first nurses dating back to the Crusades and Knights Templar. In historical literature, men are favored as nurses because they are considered better suited to leadership and administrative positions. Female nurses may be marginalized because they are seen as better prepared to be the caring patient advocates who remain at the bedside, delivering care that is traditionally considered women’s work.

Female nursing students’ responses to questions regarding the public’s perception of nursing weren’t so different from those of male students. Here are a few statements from female nursing students:

- “…I think the public gets its perception of nursing from where nursing started. We have always been traditionally female. Nurses still hang on to tradition…the media sees that and so does the public. And that is why I think the public still sees us as just following orders…”
- “I think the images of nursing that the media portrays are really negative. I don’t think that people realize the specialties … They think of a nurse as just doing dirty work in a hospital. They don’t realize there are so many aspects to it.”
- “I think the public’s perception of nursing comes from its motherly role, taking care of people and that sort of thing.”
Effects on career choices
The study found that the fictional images of nursing on television and in the movies played a part in career choices and job opportunities for both male and female students. Here are some responses regarding employment:

“Well, I like trauma. I like the fast pace and the adrenaline rush. That is what I see on television all the time, the fast pace and the adrenaline. I know it isn’t always going to be like that, but the shows really hold my interest and have influenced my career choices…”

“Television shows have influenced me not to work in the emergency department. I don’t know if that is because they portray it as so chaotic, but it has kind of scared me to work in a hospital because of the fact that the television shows make it look like the nurses are overworked and not respected by the physicians. They make it look like it is not very much fun…”

“I think if I had been going into nursing right at the time when Meet the Parents came out and from some of the images I have seen on ER and SCRUBS, I don’t know if it would have necessarily gotten me to say, no I don’t want to do this. But...it would have made me think twice about it…”

Effect on recruitment
How does the media’s portrayal of nursing affect recruitment into nursing programs? Students had this to say:

“I am sure there has been a boost of nursing applicants and people trying to get into nursing school because of the images on television. It is portrayed like a kind of high-profile career because of these shows…”

“I feel the images of nursing in movies and television hinder the recruitment of people into the field because I think that they portray nursing as a kind of degrading career. Also, they portray nurses that are usually women, and they show a lot of lazy nurses on television.”

“I really don’t see a lot that would encourage a man to become a nurse from the media portrayals. There is nothing on television that makes nursing look like it would be a neat field and make people think, “I’ll be a nurse” because you never see a male nurse. And the female nurses that are on television, half of them are portrayed as idiots…”

Nursing’s voice
Where does the nursing profession go from here to attract and retain the brightest men and women? Not a lot has changed since the early 1980s when Kalisch and Kalisch completed their first research on nursing’s image in the media.10 Nursing needs to be proactive in speaking about the work nurses do and the education required to be a nurse. Campaigns to recruit young people into the profession need to reach the youngest students in the elementary schools. Both male and female nursing students voiced concern about the public’s perception of nursing depicted in the media. Students expressed alarm that the media portrays the nursing profession in an unflattering manner.

Nursing has been a silent profession. It’s only beginning to find its voice. Nursing professionals have begun speaking out about what nursing does and what effects it has on people, communities, and the nation. The impact nursing has on the nation’s healthcare system should be a concern for all citizens and must be discussed openly and honestly.

Nurses can participate by taking opportunities to teach. Not just teaching patients or students in a nursing curriculum, but teaching the public. First, talk to people. Bringing nursing to the public is one way to get people to understand the profession. Speak at meetings such as Rotary Clubs, book clubs, community groups, church groups, youth groups, school meetings, and school fairs to let people know about nursing.

Bring your passion. Let people know why nursing is exciting, interesting, and challenging. Speak about the starting salaries and the opportunities available to nurses. Talk about the degrees in higher education available to nurses and the difference nurses make in people’s lives. Discuss the research that nurses deal with daily to bring cutting-edge care to their patients and students.

Finally, nursing should learn to advertise in ways that bring the profession the respect other professions have.
Write articles for newspapers and journals that reach wide audiences. Write letters to editor. Show that nurses are valued and needed in wide ranging articles about the fragile health care system.1,11 When colleagues do something remarkable, share it with the public through radio, television, and newspapers. Volunteer to be interviewed about healthcare and nursing issues. Nurses need to start putting themselves in the public’s eye and stop being the silent professionals in health care. Don’t let television and movies mold the image of nursing.

References

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