



Sandy Summers

Group Takes On Negative Image Of Nurses, Nursing

Countering the often negative image of nurses and the profession of nursing perpetrated by mass media and advertising is the daunting task taken on by The Truth about Nursing and its Executive Director Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, a native of Vernon, CT. According to the organization's mission statement, "The Truth about Nursing seeks to increase public understanding of the central, front-line role nurses play in modern health care. Our focus is to promote more accurate, balanced and frequent media portrayals of nurses and increase the media's use of nurses as expert sources." The Truth about Nursing's ultimate goal is "to foster growth in the size and diversity of the nursing profession at a time of critical shortage; strengthen nursing practice, teaching and research; and improve the health care system."

The Truth about Nursing has drawn a bead on some heavyweight mass media targets, most significantly popular TV series such as "ER," "Scrubs," "House," "Grey's Anatomy" and "Private Practice." The organization has also targeted the classic, if unsavory, media image of the sexually available nurse. The group recently contacted a Hartford brewery that makes a beer it calls "naughty nurse amber ale."

Summers, co-author of *Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk*, recently spoke with Connecticut Nursing News about her organization's efforts.

CNN: How did The Truth about Nursing get started?

SS: The movement was founded by myself and six other graduate students at Johns Hopkins University in 2001, over concerns about cuts in nursing education that were being proposed by the Bush Administration. We began to meet informally to decide what to do about the nursing shortage and we searched for something that no one else was really doing. Our question was why would anyone think it was a good idea to cut funding for nursing education in time of a global nursing crisis? Few decision makers seem to understand the true value of nursing and it occurred to us that this was why nursing has been so disregarded and chronically underfunded.

CNN: How did your focus on the popular media come into the picture?

SS: We wanted to get to the root of why people place so little value on nursing. At that time, the most influential health show on TV was "ER." We wrote to "ER"

about the portrayal of nurses on the show and later arranged a conference call with one of the show's co-executive producers and the medical advisor -- a physician. They seemed to listen a little, but when we later tried to follow up they were resistant to our messages. In the meantime, we began developing our website, now at www.truthaboutnursing.org, and began posting our media analyses not only of "ER," but also of other media. We began our work educating the public about how media depictions affect the value of nursing through our site and our free e-news alerts.

CNN: Are shows like "ER" still the main target of your organization?

SS: Pretty much. We focus on TV the most because it reaches so many people worldwide and is so influential. But we also analyze a wide range of media, everything from films, radio, and advertisements to newspapers, magazines and billboards. Ninety percent of people say they get health information from the media. Half of people get their health information from dramatic television, and half of viewers trust that information to be accurate. "ER" took a tremendous amount of pride in the accuracy of its portrayals, which made it extra damaging when it came to the inaccuracy of the roles its characters played. Physicians on television are largely portrayed as doing the work that real-life nurses do. But nurses, not physicians, deserve credit for nursing work. When the public and decision-makers understand what we do, we will have a better standing on which to ask for adequate funding for clinical practice (like good staffing ratios), education and research.

CNN: Can some of the problem with TV medical shows be placed with dramatic license?

SS: No. It's not an accident that 42 out of 45 main characters in last season's health shows were physicians. It's a clear bias. Hollywood thinks only physicians and their work can be dramatic. But that's obviously not true or their characters wouldn't spend half their time doing nursing work. There are too few nurses as technical advisors on those shows and the ones who are there don't seem to be able to advance nursing.

CNN: Have you seen any progress in rescuing the image of nurses in mass media?

SS: We think of our mission as being on the 100-year plan. Changing how people think about nursing won't happen overnight, but if we don't start now, we'll never get there. We have seen some movement, though. Chains like Wal-Mart and CVS have backed off on ad campaigns that suggested that nurses are dumb, or a that a nurse can be trained in about four hours. Many advertisers have responded positively. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services changed the name of one of their health campaigns to a name less physician-centric. Even Hollywood has responded. With "ER," our "good cop" approach didn't work, so we moved to the "bad cop" approach and it had more effect. They did slowly incorporate some of our ideas over the years, and by its final season, the depiction of nursing was often pretty good. Though there's only so far it can improve when physicians dominate the show -- they still did a lot of nursing work. "House," "Grey's Anatomy" and "Private Practice" are often very hostile to nursing, but even they have taken tiny steps to respond to our concerns. They have miles to go.

CNN: What's the status of the "Naughty Nurse" beer issue at the City Steam Brewery Café in Hartford?

SS: I called owner Jay Dumond a few times over the past months leaving him detailed messages about my concerns. And I sent him a letter and a copy of our book *Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk* with the naughty nurse chapter flagged. But he hasn't returned my calls and the Naughty Nurse Amber Ale remains on the menu. I hope CNN readers will join us in asking owner Jay Dumond to rename the beer to a name that doesn't suggest nurses exist to provide sexual services. Call him at (860) 525 - 1600 or email him at manager@citysteambrewerycafe.com. People often do change their images if nurses just stand up and speak about these damaging images. If nurses don't speak, the stereotypes continue unabated. It's up to us.

CNN: Are there hard data that show that these kinds of negative images of nurses are harmful to the profession at large?

SS: In a 2006 University of Missouri study, 72 percent of nurses reported being sexually harassed in the workplace. The naughty nurse stereotype didn't have anything to do with it. In 2000, JWT Communications did a study of 1,800 students in grades 2-10 in 10 U.S. cities. The focus group studies began with discussion of careers in general, and when the conversation turned to nursing, the boys stopped paying attention because, they said, the conversation no longer pertained to them. They perceived nursing as a "girl's job." Students got their most striking impression of nursing from "ER," and they knew more about the nurse's love life than they did her professional life. Participants thought nursing was a technical field "like shop" and private school students felt that nursing was too lowly for them. These data are right in line with the handmaiden nursing stereotype most Hollywood shows push on the public.

CNN: Have you found significant generational and educational differences in attitudes about the "naughty nurse" image and its effect on the profession?

SS: Students and graduate-prepared nurses seem most interested in improving nursing's image, though there is interest in improving it from across the spectrum of nurses. Sometimes young nurses don't like that we object to the naughty nurse image. There's this odd perception that nurses can only exist in terms of stereotypes. So the young nurses tend to gravitate more toward the naughty nurse, because the other options are pretty abysmal. But nurses can be depicted as three-dimensional human beings who save lives and improve outcomes--we don't have to be just stereotypes. When people think that it's *part of our jobs* to provide sexual services to patients and physicians, that makes us some sort of in-hospital prostitute. What man or self-respecting woman would want to join a profession with this image? And how can we get funding or our work, education or research when it's all about providing sex?

CNN: What about possible First Amendment issues that might arise from in what you do?

SS: We are a small non-profit, not the U.S. government. We don't have the power to, nor do we want to, stop anyone's speech. People also have the free speech right to make racial slurs, but this doesn't mean they are protected from the counter

speech they would hear after making such comments. The Truth About Nursing also has the right to free speech. We counter damaging speech with accurate information about nursing in the hopes that those we try to reach will change the way they think about nursing and in turn, improve the media they produce about nursing.

CNN: How do you see the future efforts of your organization?

SS: The media are still an enormous problem, and to turn around the ever-increasing nursing shortage, we've got to educate the world about the true value of nursing. Inexplicably, three new shows featuring nurses are headed to television soon. "Nurse Jackie" will air on Showtime starting this month. We've seen the first episode and loved it. Many will chafe at Jackie's multitude of flaws, including her prescription drug addiction. But we are more concerned about what the show says about *nursing* than we are about this one particular nurse. "Nurse Jackie" paints a remarkable portrait of nursing responsibility, autonomy, patient advocacy and need for competence. Whether the standard is upheld by this one nurse is another matter. We are hoping for similar levels of public education of nursing from "Hawthorne," airing on TNT this month, and "Mercy," airing on NBC around January 2010. Both shows feature nurses. It looks as if the beginning of a new day, but you never know how long these shows will last and how influential they will be. And it would also take decades of great shows to counter the damage that has been done to nursing over the past century. We will work to help the shows to the extent they will allow our input. If we can't get an inside track, we will write up our analyses, send them to the shows and post them for our readers to help them understand how media depictions of nurses affect our thinking and how our thinking in turn, affects our actions in relation to nursing. We must increase the value of nursing so we can get the funding nurses need for nursing practice, education and research. Without sufficient funding, we can't resolve the global nursing shortage. We encourage all CNN readers to join us in changing how the world thinks about nursing at www.TruthAboutNursing.org. Thank you!

CNN: Thank you very much.



www.truthaboutnursing.org
Want to read more news on nursing in the media?

The Truth About Nursing, a non-profit organization seeking to "change how the world thinks about nursing" was founded in December 2008 by Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, formerly the executive director of The Center for Nursing Advocacy. In her new role, Summers will continue the work she began in 2001 to improve understanding of the nursing profession through a wide range of media advocacy and education efforts.

Questions, comments or information: info@truthaboutnursing.org

Alerts re: a good or bad portrayal of nursing in the media: media-alert@truthaboutnursing.org

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