

# Tuning out the STEREOTYPES

DOES IT MATTER THAT NURSES ARE SCARCELY VISIBLE IN TELEVISION'S TOP-RATING HOSPITAL DRAMAS? AMERICAN NURSING ADVOCATES SANDY AND HARRY SUMMERS SAY IT DOES AND THEY'VE WRITTEN THE BOOK TO PROVE IT. **FIONA CASSIE** READS ON

**D**id you just call me a nurse?" snaps Dr Meredith Grey to a male colleague in *Grey's Anatomy*.

... the irascible Greg House cajoles a physician friend in *House* to stop annoying him so they can instead "rank nurses in order of do-ability".

... the five interns in *Grey's Anatomy* sit keeping a compassionate and caring eye over a quintuplet each in NICU... not a nurse in sight.

In fact it is so rare to see a nurse on *Grey's Anatomy* or *House* you could be forgiven for assuming Hollywood had overcome the nursing shortage by replacing them with doctors instead.

And if nurses do appear they are often silent, silly or sexy.

But that's okay - its just entertainment isn't it? Nobody really believes they are for real and nurses probably watch these two internationally top-rating shows as much as any other profession, so why should we care?

Well, Sandy Summers thinks we should care.

Since 2001 the emergency and critical care nurse has been an advocate for improving public understanding of nursing.

“Nurses may regularly top public opinion polls as “honest and ethical” but they don’t get the working conditions or social status of professions at the bottom of such polls like law and advertising.”

That year she and a fellow graduate student at Johns Hopkins concerned about the nursing shortage set-up a non-profit organisation, initially known as the Centre for Nursing Advocacy. Now re-branded as The Truth About Nursing, the organisation aims to help overcome what the pair saw as a factor behind the shortage – lack of public awareness about what nurses actually do.

Much of the organisation's work has focused on lobbying the media for more accurate portrayals of nursing.

It has had some success, like persuading those behind a global campaign for Skechers-featuring Christine Aguilera as a “naughty nurse” – to reconsider relying on old nursing stereotypes.

But frustration remains with physician-dominated programmes like *Grey's Anatomy* (New Zealand's second most watched show in June) and *House* topping its annual awards for the worst media portrayals of nursing several years running.

Some years ago Summers brought husband Harry Jacobs Summers, a lawyer and self-declared media junkie, into the fold and this year they published *Saving Lives: Why the Media's Portrayal of Nurses Puts Us All at Risk*.

So how does enjoying the fictional romances and rivalry of *Grey's Anatomy's* interns and the rants of curmudgeonly medical sleuth Greg House put the public at risk?

In 300 closely-written pages, the Summers make a number of very strong cases for how the media's ignoring or trivialising of nursing feeds the ignorance that has helped create the life-threatening global nursing shortage.

And, they argue, things won't get better if the entertainment and news media continue to exalt, quote and idealise physicians at the expense of the invisible 'handmaiden' profession of nursing.

As the Summers argue in their introduction: “... patients die when nurses are understaffed or under-empowered, or when ‘nursing care’ is assigned to those who are not nurses, in order to cut costs.”

“The current nursing shortage kills thousands, if not millions, of people every year.”

In which case, nursing needs to be at the forefront of people's minds rather than consigned to background scene fillers.

But in 2008, 28 out of the 29 major characters on the top US hospital dramas – *House*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* – were physicians.

That's a problem because light entertainment, Sandy and Harry believe, can have a very serious impact.

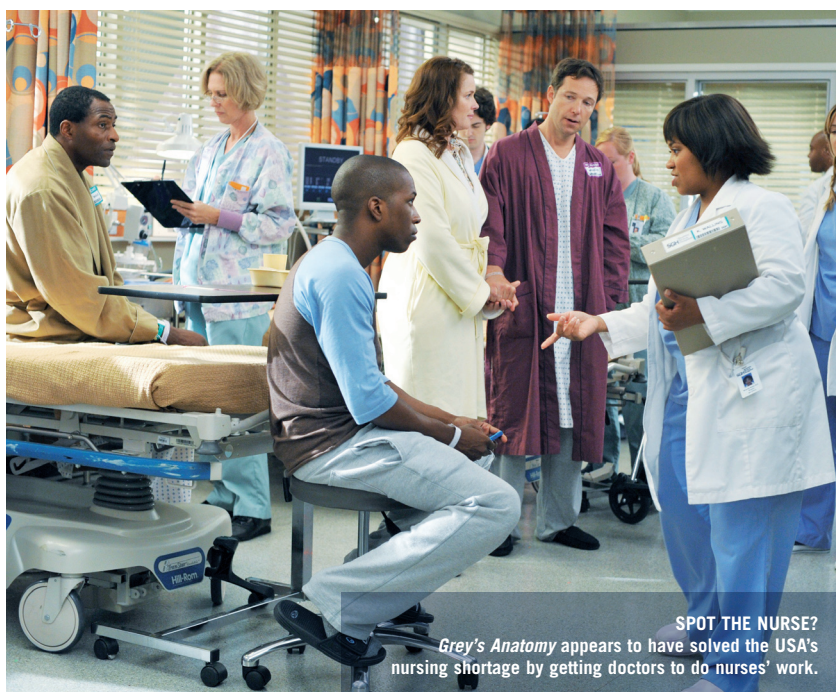
Research certainly seems to support their concern. They quote a focus group study of 1800



#### NASTY TO NURSES

If the lead character in the series *House* has anything to say about a nurse it is likely to be demeaning. But that's also how he talks to doctors..





**SPOT THE NURSE?**  
*Grey's Anatomy* appears to have solved the USA's nursing shortage by getting doctors to do nurses' work.

young Americans who said they received their main impression of nursing from *ER* and thought it was a "girl's job", a "technical" or "trades" type job and not a career for private school students.

When the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed television viewers in 2000, just over half reported getting information they trusted from prime-time shows and more than a quarter said such shows were among their top three sources for health information.

The impact of the long-running show *ER* has been researched on a number of occasions with one survey of regular viewers finding more than half learned about important health issues from the show and it helped a third make choices about their family's health care.

What worries Sandy is while *ER* has been the one primetime drama show to have one nurse character with a close-to-realistic role, there has only ever been one nurse character at any time. The other nurses are as likely to be seen pushing gurneys as actually nursing.

Likewise the comedy show *Scrubs* – which on occasion shows nurse Carla Espinosa catching intern errors and displaying an encyclopaedic knowledge of her patients' care plans – also has doctors providing care that is usually the domain of nurses.

It appears these shows – which have decent attempts at providing strong nurse characters – are as guilty as the rest in depicting plenty of what Sandy dubs "physician nursing".

Physician nursing is when Hollywood gets doctors to do on screen what nurses usually do in real life.

Like those *Grey's Anatomy* interns poised beside the quintuplet incubators. Or the caring young physician in *House* shown walking and toileting a patient after surgery. It means doctors rather

than nurses are depicted setting up IV medications, using the paddles in defibrillation and talking through tensions between patients and relatives.

In fact, one of this journalist's favourite games is playing 'spot the nurse' during episodes of *House* because they are so rarely seen during all those dedicated-doctor bedside vigils.

Relegating nurses to roles as scene-fillers or doctors' handmaidens does not help overcome what Sandy Summers sees as another major issue for modern nursing – being seen as yesterday's career and a second-rate option for ambitious young women, let alone men.

That is why the young female physicians in *Grey's Anatomy* see being called 'nurse' as such an insult.

The fact that about 13 per cent of American nurses have master's degrees or PhDs doesn't seem to alter this.

Another stereotype the media feeds is the image of nurses as 'angels' or nursing as a calling. It's a sentimental stereotype that Sandy acknowledges many nurses do not entirely reject, as they believe it encompasses the compassionate and caring side of nursing.

But Sandy says the stereotype is unhelpful. Nurses may regularly top public opinion polls as "honest and ethical" but they don't get the working conditions or social status of professions at the bottom of such polls like law and advertising.

"We wonder how many of the people who trust nurses so much would react if their child announced that he or she wanted to be a nurse."

Nursing would benefit if it was seen as a career that saved lives and required university education, rather than as a calling for people with the compassion to clean up bodily fluids.

But be it 'ministering angels', 'naughty', 'sexy' or 'battle axes', the stereotypes persist.

Sandy and Harry are well aware they are open to being seen as PC and humourless when challenging the media's use of stereotypes – like using the naughty nurse image to sell everything from beer to razor blades and back to beer again.

Their response to programmers and advertisers who say such images are just joking or ironic, is that they get the joke but it is hackneyed and opens nurses up to sexual harassment.

The Summers look forward to the day when nurses are respected more for their live-saving actions than their looks, viewed as advocates rather than angels and the phrase "did you just call me a nurse" is seen as a compliment rather than a curse. +

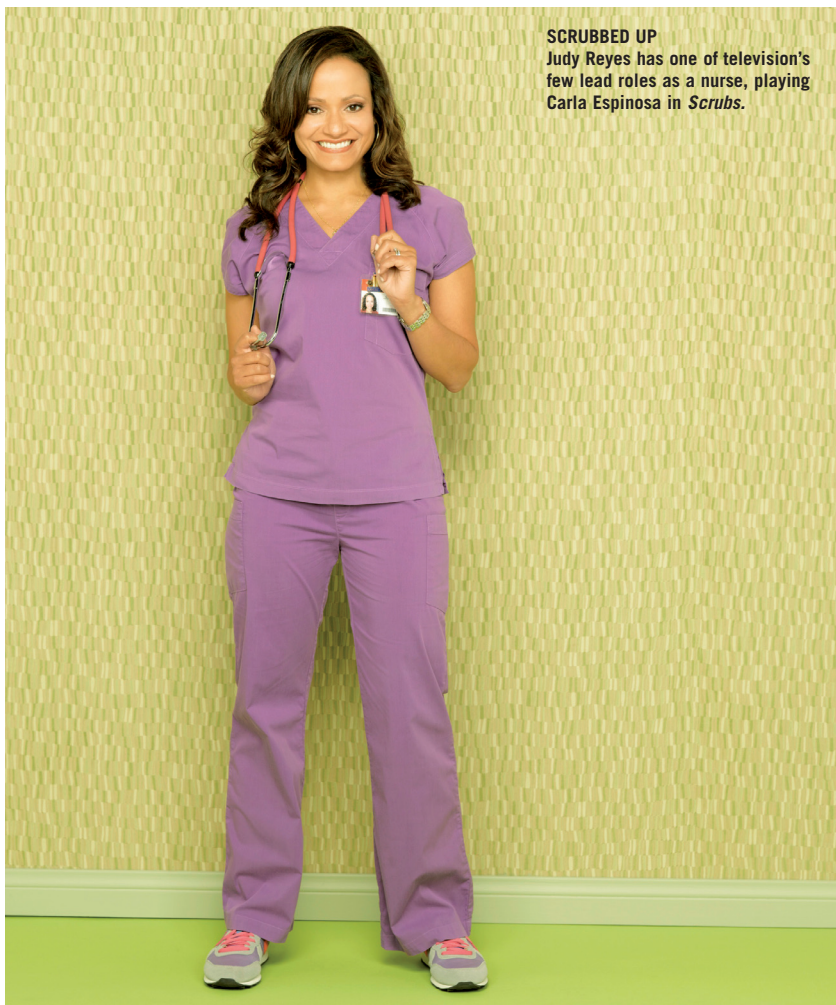
\* Find out more about Sandy and Harry's work at [www.truthaboutnursing.org/](http://www.truthaboutnursing.org/)

## US MEDIA EXPERT TO OFFER WORKSHOPS

- + Suzanne Gordon, co-author of the how-to manual for nurses' communicating with the media is a keynote speaker at the NZNO's centennial conference in September.
- + The journalist, author and lecturer is also holding workshops in Auckland and Christchurch on September 21 and 22 to encourage nurses to talk about their work and enter more fully into debates about health care and workforce issues.
- + More information about registration can be found at [www.nzno.org.nz/Activities/Centennial.aspx](http://www.nzno.org.nz/Activities/Centennial.aspx)

## SHORTLAND STREET UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

- + New Zealand's top rating television show in June was the hospital-based local soap opera *Shortland Street*, beating *Grey's Anatomy* into second place.
- + *Shortland Street's* nurses are definitely a force to be reckoned with, though in true soap opera style this is more because of their links to murder, madness and romance than their nursing skills.
- + Nurses currently account for six of the 20-character core cast followed by six doctors (three female/three male) and the remaining eight are administrators, bar managers and teenage offspring.
- + A seventh nurse and her doctor lover were written out during a holiday romance in Rarotonga and only the doctor character has so far been replaced though there are two other non-core nurse characters.
- + The nurses on *Shortland Street* are variously described as "dedicated and warm", "fascinated by surgery" with an "encyclopaedic knowledge", "funky and intelligent", a "popular member of staff" with a "gorgeous figure", and "ex-copper turned nurse".
- + The one male nurse is currently the nurse manager – an ex-soldier turned nurse who is described as assertive and a careerist. He is married to a new Indian migrant nurse, which reflects the high number of overseas-trained nurses in New Zealand.
- + There are also Maori and Pacific nurses and doctors in proportions most health analysts would like to see even if they do not reflect the reality of the current New Zealand workforce.
- + Recent plot-lines have included the importance of handovers from nurse to nurse and a nurse and doctor are described as fighting together to save a rabid patient's life. Of course, it is the doctor who finally saves the day.



**SCRUBBED UP**  
 Judy Reyes has one of television's few lead roles as a nurse, playing Carla Espinosa in *Scrubs*.