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January-February 2001 • Volume 17 • Number 1

Editorial

Writing an op-ed commentary on nursing

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WE ALL HAVE IDEAS about nursing that we would like the public to know. But few of us consider useful and productive ways to share our opinions. Writing an opinion-editorial commentary (also known as an op-ed piece) for your local newspaper is an excellent way to reach many people to address nursing's issues and offer suggestions for improvement.

An op-ed piece is similar to an editorial, but it is written by someone who is not employed by the publisher. Anyone can submit an op-ed piece to a newspaper. Which ones are published is decided by the publisher.

Nurses have a unique perspective on the health care system. We've been there, seen it, and have mentally addressed many of the problems facing health care today. We talk about the problems, even write about them. But our conversations are with each other, and our publications are directed to our own profession (Sullivan, 2000). Nurses can bring a fresh voice to the local health care scene, a position that few others can have.

With all the work you have to do, you say, why take on another task? One that might not be successful. One of the responsibilities we all have is to use our expertise to prepare for the future. We care for patients, hoping they will get better or be able to die with dignity. We teach students, hoping they will care for others in the future. We direct programs and schools, hoping our work will enhance the future for those we serve. Helping improve the health care system, by any and every way we can, is our responsibility as nurses, professionals, and citizens.

One way to contribute to the dialogue about health care is to write a letter to the editor. If you want to respond to a particular article with your opinion, a letter to the editor is appropriate. A letter writer can express anger, irritation, or be antagonistic. Not so the op-ed piece. The op-ed piece must present an objective and well-thought out argument, describing the problem and offering a solution.

An article in the newspaper about local hospitals' concern about the pending nursing shortage (Vande-Water, 2000) spurred me to prepare an op-ed piece. I felt compelled to share my opinion about some of the issues contributing to the labor shortage, which is predicted to worsen. The answers seemed obvious, but an angry retort, I knew, would be futile. It would smack of self-interest and portray nurses as whiny and ill-tempered. Using the advice from an article about how to write an op-ed piece (Pence, 2000), I wrote a commentary that was accepted and published on the editorial page of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Sullivan, 2000).

Many of you have written op-ed commentaries to help enlighten the public, but many more nurses could consider writing for their local papers. Here are several suggestions to help a submission be published.

- Respond quickly. Whatever is in the news today that moves you to respond, do so immediately. Others may be doing the same and delay may favor publication of their piece. The sooner the better, though taking time to gather sources, verify facts, and collect your thoughts is important. The article about the nursing shortage was the focus of my commentary.
- Get the facts and offer to provide substantiating data. Most of the information needed may already be available to you. Your colleagues, experts, or a search on the Web may yield the data you need to support your opinion. Don't worry about finding every reference—this isn't a dissertation. Just get the basics so you can make your point with accuracy. Data I needed included the average age of practicing nurses, enrollment data from schools of nursing, both nationally and locally (AACN provided that), and the predicted future needs for nurses. All were easily located.
- Decide on the point you want to make, realizing you cannot say everything you would like to about the subject. I decided on two major points: (1) that nurses must be involved in the redesign of health care; and (2) that the public image of nursing must more accurately portray what nurses do to encourage more people to choose nursing as a career.
- Be constructive. The point of an editorial is to suggest what ought to be done.
- Think of the reader's interests and needs by reading other commentaries and editorials. Pay attention to content, structure, style, and tone.
- Avoid writing in the first person. This is appropriate for a letter to the editor, but a first person account sounds opinionated, not a reasoned opinion.
- Avoid nursing jargon and academic rhetoric. Remember you are addressing a lay audience. Translate your points into words the public will understand just like you do to explain complicated information to your patients.
- Sign with the most appropriate title. Use credentials readers will know, avoiding initials that mean little outside of nursing or health care. If you use your employment title, be sure to have your employer's approval. You may state, for example, that you are a nurse or a professor as long as your workplace cannot be identified. It is important, however, to document your expertise to the editor.
- Contact the paper for the guidelines for op-ed pieces and for their preferred format. I contacted the paper by e-mail and found out that they wanted no more than 750 words, and they asked that the material be submitted in the body of an e-mail and not in an attachment.
- Use others to critique your work. As with any writing, we are often too close to the subject to see omissions or redundancies. Suggestions by colleagues pointed out some vague statements that I had thought were perfectly clear.

The next step is to submit your work. Include your daytime phone number and e-mail address in case they want to contact you. And wait. It may take a while. My article was published about a month after I submitted it. The paper may edit your work (their prerogative), change the title (mine was), or cut it. Or they might decline to publish it. If that happens, do not give up. You may have a community paper that will publish it. When a new issue emerges, try again. I plan to.

I discovered another benefit a few weeks after my commentary was published. You get paid! A modest sum, to be sure, but any remuneration sends a message—your words were worth it.

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Publishing and Reprint Information

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- *Note: A copy of Dr. Sullivan's commentary is available from AACN.*
- *Copyright © 2001 by W.B. Saunders Company*
- *8755-7223/01/1701-0001\$10.00/0*
- *doi:10.1053/jpnu.2001.20209*