The Invisible Majority: Nurses in the Media

The image of nurses in the media isn't poor; it just isn't. Nurses and the field of nursing rarely appear in the media except when a nurse commits a crime or is negligent. Seldom is a nursing study cited in the national media. A recent exception was a study documenting that increased nurse staffing had a positive effect on patient outcomes (Kovner & Gergen, 1998), which was the basis for an Associated Press wire story picked up by more than 100 print and electronic media outlets around the country. Such news in the public media is, unfortunately, uncommon.

The Woodhull Study, commissioned by Sigma Theta Tau International and conducted by the University of Rochester School of Nursing, found that nurses were all but invisible in media coverage of health care (Center Nursing Press, 1997). Nurses were cited only 4 per cent of the time in the more than 2,000 health-related articles culled from 16 major news publications. The few references found only mentioned nurses or nursing tangentially in spite of the fact that nurses could have provided information germane to the story. Furthermore, in health care industry publications, nurses were referenced only 1 per cent of the time.

Why Isn't Nursing's Story Told?

Communication is nurses' stock in trade, but few nurses use their extensive array of communication skills to promote themselves or their profession. Is it our heritage to be self-deprecating, always deferring to "higher" authority? "You'll have to talk to the doctor/administrator/PR about that," is the statement many in the media report they hear when they ask a nurse about health care, even if the question specifically refers to nursing care. To stand out from the crowd or to brag seems to smack of self-promotion and is to be avoided at any cost, even threatening the value of nursing in the public eye. Regardless of the reason for this inappropriate denial of nursing's life-sustaining contribution to health care, it results in nursing's invisibility in public and in the media.

To address this absence of coverage of the vital role nurses play in the health of the world, several organizational activities are taking place. In a one-day conference for deans and university public relations officers sponsored by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the National Institute of Nursing Research, the American Organization of Nurse Executives, and Sigma Theta Tau International, members of the media discussed ways to enhance nursing's presence in health care reporting (as distinguished from medical reporting). Subsequently, Sigma Theta Tau presented similar panels during the 1998-1999 regional conferences around the country.

What we have learned from these distinguished panelists is that all media, in print or broadcast, work under very tight time schedules (from a few hours to a few days) during which all information must be gathered and written, so reporters call people they know and trust to have the information they are seeking. Unless they know, or better yet, have a relationship with a nurse who is available in a short period of time, they are unlikely to approach a nurse. In addition, the panel members said, practicing nurses and nurse researchers often describe their work in confusing scientific or clinical language, ill-suited for public consumption. Finally, we learned that public affairs officers (also called public information or public relations officers) often hold gatekeeper positions in hospitals and universities and that they invariably refer news reporters to physicians for health-related questions.

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Making Nursing Visible

What can nursing leaders do to encourage media coverage of nursing’s contributions to health and health care? We have learned a great deal about developing relationships with legislators and the power that we can leverage with those relationships. That same strategy must be used with those who can influence nursing’s ability to be known. We learned that we must establish a relationship with legislators before we need their help, and then, when we request their support, we must show them how what we want will help them (the rules that govern any successful reciprocal negotiation). These same lessons can enhance nursing’s news coverage.

First, we must build relationships with hospital, college, or university public relations professionals and ask for their help. They are key to connecting with external media. One medical center publication featured an article on a new pediatric unit about to be opened. The accompanying photo showed a clinical nurse specialist putting together child’s play equipment, but, unfortunately, the equipment and the nurse were positioned in such a way that it looked like the nurse was cleaning the floor. But that wasn’t the worst news. When the nursing administrator brought the photo to hospital administrators and public relations staff, they saw nothing wrong with the picture! They had no awareness that such a photo, while not derogatory, did nothing to portray the actual value that the pediatric nurse specialist brought to the unit—a potential major marketing tool for the hospital.

Next, we must meet the media, undersign their needs, and show how nurses can help them. Just as legislators ask “How will the world be improved if I support your cause (which helps me get reelected)?” Similarly, the media ask, “How will people’s lives be improved if we report on your latest research or practice (which will help me land a better story)?” Just as the case we made for funding for nursing research—that improved health care would result from increased nursing research knowledge—so we must make the case that nursing news informs and educates the public and promotes improved health and health care.

What should nurses and nurse leaders do to tell their story? Use every opportunity to let people know you are a nurse—in your community, school, church, synagogue, or mosque. Learn to explain what you do in practice or research in a few descriptive words that the public can understand. The statement, “My study looks at ways to reduce postoperative pain after heart bypass surgery,” can be understood by any layperson. Most importantly, develop relationships with members of the media, telling them how you and your colleagues can help them with their stories. Nurses often insist that they cannot talk about nursing without their health care agency’s permission, which only applies when they are representing the organization (ie, using the organization’s name). RN is a sufficient credential.

We must no longer hide ourselves or our profession from public view. What we do is too important to be ignored. Only when no story about health care is complete without nursing’s input will nursing’s story be told.

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References