



## The image of nursing: Everyone's responsibility

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Originally published January 18, 2011 in the [Nursing Times](#)

In recent months, we have outlined the major stereotypes that plague the nursing image and undermine nurses' claims to adequate respect and resources. Poor public understanding of the profession underlies many of the more immediate causes of the global nursing shortage.

Nurses themselves must play the leading role in improving their image, as we will discuss in detail in our next piece. Nurses must believe in themselves and project that belief to others. Nurses should persuade the media to provide a more accurate picture of the profession, and they should consider creating new media themselves.

But first, we will explore what *everyone* — not just nurses — can do to help. Many segments of society can influence both media portrayals of nursing and people's understanding of nursing generally. We can all listen to nurses and watch what actually happens when we interact with the health care system. What are the real nurses doing? Does the media we see reflect that?

Everyone should reconsider her assumptions when it comes to nursing. Do we credit physicians for things nurses really do? If a nurse does something impressive, do we say, "You could be a doctor!"—suggesting that being a nurse is inferior?

We can also consider whether our choice of language reflects the real nursing role, because language has a profound effect on how we think and act. For example, using the word "nursing" to mean breastfeeding subtly suggests that nursing is something we can do without health training, and that only women can be nurses. Likewise, might terms like "matron" and "ward sister" reinforce unhelpful gender stereotypes about nurses? And nurses don't take "orders" from physicians. If nurses disagree with a physician care plan, they are ethically obligated to work for a better one.

Some parts of society have special influence. The news media can learn from nurses about what nurses really do. And reporters should consult nurses about *all* health care stories, not just nursing stories—though even many of those include no nurse input, as we have seen. Nurses make great expert sources because they are trained to convey their knowledge to lay people.

Creators of entertainment media should include characters to reflect the nurses who actually play central roles in the compelling health care that such media often shows physicians providing. Television shows like *Nurse Jackie* are a great start. But it would take decades of popular programming to counteract the image of nurses as peripheral subordinates (“Yes, doctor! Right away!”) that shows like *House* and *Grey’s Anatomy* have spread around the world.

Advertisers should consider the effects of nursing stereotypes and try to find alternative ways to sell their products. For example, in advertising products like alcohol, naughty nurse imagery is not technically required. Some companies, like Heineken to Cadbury-Schweppes, have been flexible in reconsidering specific ad campaigns.

Health care providers and executives should ensure that their public speech reflects understanding of nursing. Hospital managers might promote nursing as they do medicine, and publicize their efforts to strengthen the profession. And insurers and drug companies can advertise without wrongly suggesting that health care revolves solely around “doctors,” particularly given the growing role of advanced practice nurses.

Consider Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). This international aid group was founded by a small group of physicians and journalists, but today more nurses than physicians work for MSF, and nurses have played leadership roles in the group. Yet its name sends the public the message that the physicians provide most or all of its health care. We have urged MSF to consider a more inclusive name, such as Soins Sans Frontières (Health Care Without Borders).

Government leaders and other policy makers should publicize their efforts to invest in nurses’ practice, education, and research, and place qualified nurses in visible positions of authority. Earlier this month, the *Nursing Times* started a petition to ensure that at least one nurse sits on the board of each of the consortia that shape decision-making about the National Health Service. Such commendable inclusion is too rare. In 2007, Google created a Health Advisory Council with 25 members, and though many were physicians, not one appeared to be a nurse.

Foundations should undertake projects to build public appreciation for nursing. We have urged funders to consider an International Museum of Modern Nursing—an exciting, interactive science museum that would show visitors cutting-edge nursing practice and research. And in a 2006 opinion piece in the *Baltimore Sun*, Sandy and nursing scholar Kristine Gebbie proposed the creation of a Nobel Prize in Nursing to recognize nurses whose work has changed the world.

Nurses' health care colleagues can also play a key role. Physicians should learn what nurses really do—for instance, that nurses do more than provide basic custodial care. In some innovative programs, medical students shadow nurses to learn what they do, or medical and nursing students take some classes together. And physicians should work to stop the crediting of physicians for nurses' work, which happens everywhere from the hospital bedside to popular television shows.

Other health workers should ensure that they are not mistaken for nurses, which undermines the public's sense of who nurses are. We admire the recent decision of Wales to adopt national nursing uniforms to help people identify nurses with different specialties and levels of authority.

What would the future look like if the public truly valued nursing? Understanding that nurses save lives can itself save lives—by providing the resources nurses need. Adequate resources for clinical settings are only the beginning. Through their holistic, preventative focus, nurses can intervene before conditions become severe, so patients don't end up dead or in expensive hospitals. Teams of community health nurses and advanced practice nurses can prevent or manage much of the illness the world now suffers. Malaria might kill fewer children, obesity-related problems like heart disease could be greatly reduced, and many critically ill infants might be home with their families.

It can happen—if *everyone* makes an effort to understand what nursing really is.