



The image of nursing: Not good enough for a feminist?

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Is nursing a job for modern men and women? Or is it just a sad throwback, suitable only for females with few options--for yesterday's girls?

In 2008 a lawyer we know explained that a friend's preschool-age daughter had a serious problem. The poor girl wanted to be a *nurse*! The girl's mother, who had a PhD and was married to a physician, was aghast. She told her daughter that she should do the "feminist" thing and be a physician.

Too many people still believe that nursing is not good enough for smart modern women. And of course, a job with that image will not attract many men either. Nursing remains more than 90 percent female. In a 2005 Bernard Hodes Group survey of U.S. men in nursing, "eighty-two percent noted that nursing is plagued by common misconceptions that emphasize the view that nursing is a female profession dominated by women, that men are not suited to it because they are not caring, and that men in nursing are gay."

These ideas hamper nursing recruitment, retention, and practice. In December 2005, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that "few secondary school pupils are interested in nursing." Some career advisers viewed nursing as "less than ideal from a feminist or masculine perspective," and one discouraged New Zealand Nurses Organization chief Geoff Annals's own daughter from pursuing nursing instead of medicine.

Some recent media has portrayed nursing as a place for strong women. Anne Perry's novels about Victorian era detective William Monk feature the formidable Nightingale-trained nurse Hester Latterly. *Nurse Jackie*'s lead character is an expert clinical leader, and perhaps the most notable recent example of an authoritative woman in nursing.

But much of the popular media created by "feminists" about modern health care has been hostile to nursing. These images appear even in children's books. In Holly Hobbie's *Fanny* (2008), a critical passage features a heroic female "physician" doll surrounded by glamorous assisting "nurse" dolls. Many feminists treat nurses with the same explicit condescension that women in general once experienced. Nurses are the new women!

Of course, globally popular television shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *ER* have also sought to promote women as health care leaders. *ER* did at least feature one fairly strong, reasonably bright female nurse character for most of the series, though she and the other nurses were rarely shown to be the clinical peers of the commanding female physicians.

But *Grey's*, like *House* and other popular recent shows, has presented nurses as nasty losers who illustrate what women have to settle for if they are not bright and ambitious like the physician characters. *Grey's* physicians Meredith Grey and Cristina Yang seethed in the show's initial episodes after physician Alex Karev called Meredith a nurse. The female physicians' priority is not to understand or collaborate

with nurses, but to distinguish themselves from what they see as a surly, uneducated servant class.

Recent films reflect similar perspectives. *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) portrayed the success of a precocious student from a troubled background and celebrated the idea that today's promising girls, unlike their bitter mothers, do not have to settle for nursing.

Even the news media shares these assumptions. A December 2005 career column in the *Chicago Tribune* discussed how women can escape the "pink ghetto" of traditionally female jobs, including nursing, and move into "professional" careers like law and accounting. Of course, fewer nurses means more death. But as employment expert Ebenezer Scrooge once noted, death is a good way to "decrease the surplus population."

Much of society and its media still regard nursing as women's work that is not appropriate for men. Even the English language reflects this idea. The terms "matron" and "ward sister" remain common in some nations. And many people wrongly believe that men become nurses only if they're not intelligent enough to be physicians.

Some media items have been open to the idea of men in nursing. In June 2006, the *Belfast Telegraph* published "I'm Not a 'Male Nurse' -- I'm a Nurse and Proud of It," which focused on "alcohol liaison nurse" Gary Doherty's pioneering work handling alcohol-related problems at a north Belfast hospital.

Perhaps the best recent Hollywood portrayal of a man in nursing is Belize, the tough, skilled nurse in Mike Nichols's 2003 film *Angels in America*, based on Tony Kushner's play. As a 1980s AIDS nurse caring for power broker Roy Cohn, Belize returns Cohn's abuse but also teaches him about his condition and provides him some comfort in his dying days.

In the film *Meet the Parents* (2000), Chicago nurse Gaylord Focker (yes, that's his name) tries to persuade prickly ex-CIA agent Jack Byrnes to bless his marriage proposal to Jack's daughter. Greg has comic misadventures, but he is a smart, resourceful nurse who endures real adversity to win the woman he loves. However, *Meet the Fockers* (2004) reveals that Greg's early background reflects what Jack calls "mediocrity." The film uses nursing as a vehicle to show that being good is as important as pursuing excellence.

New U.S. television shows premiering in 2009 introduced several male nurse characters. The best was *Nurse Jackie's* Mo-Mo de la Cruz, a strong, witty, and skilled gay man who was Jackie's best friend in nursing. But the show dropped the character after its first season, and the remaining male nurse characters are no substitute.

Other Hollywood television shows, including *ER* and *Scrubs*, have poked fun at "nurses." And male nurse characters have at times served as vehicles for "feminist" role reversal, obediently taking "orders" from powerful, expert female physicians.

Even some recruiting campaigns reflect traditional assumptions about men in nursing. These efforts stress that "real men" can be nurses, but they do not suggest that it's wrong to look down on male nurses who *are* gay or effeminate; just don't confuse *us* with *them*.

Our hope is that people will leave their stereotypes of nursing as lowly women's work somewhere far from the hospital wards. We hear there is space at the morgue.