



SCRIPT DOCTOR: MEDICINE IN THE MEDIA

Nurses: MIA on TV

By Andrew Holtz, MPH

Beatrice Kalisch, PhD, RN, FAAN, of the University of Michigan School of Nursing was doing research on the impact of federal funding on nursing. The comments she heard from Senators and Representatives startled her.

"Their image of nursing was so off-base that it was alarming. And it was based largely on media portrayals," Dr. Kalisch says.

Thus began her efforts to document and understand the dearth of strong nurse characters on television and in other media. She and colleagues embarked on detailed analyses of television shows stretching back to the 1950s.

Among their conclusions:

- Compared with physicians, nurses were less central to the plots, less intelligent, less rational, and less individualistic.

- The nursing of patients on TV was usually performed by physicians, and indeed nurses were often portrayed as less empathic than physicians and remiss in providing personal comforting to patients.

Dr. Kalisch says that most TV shows lead viewers to believe that there is no special body of nursing knowl-



Andrew Holtz, MPH, is a former CNN Medical Correspondent and the author of "The Medical Science of House, M.D." This column examines mass media programs, particularly entertainment TV, for insight into popular perceptions, so that rather than merely wincing at distortions or oversimplifications in the portrayals of medicine on these shows, health care professionals can learn something from media professionals about the way that medical and health topics are presented. Send questions to him about how the media treat medical topics or suggestions for future columns to OT@lwvny.com

edge. And as the researchers tracked the portrayals of nurses over the years, things did not improve; they got worse.

Why does it matter? Some nurses say the media images are partly to blame for problems recruiting and retaining nurses, and difficulties winning support for research on nursing.

"The media image means that nurses often aren't taken seriously," says Ada Sue Hinshaw, PhD, RN, FAAN, the former Dean of the University of Michigan School of Nursing and currently a Distinguished Nurse Scholar in residence at the Institute of Medicine. She notes that the National Institute for Nursing Research (NINR) accounts for just one-half of one percent of the NIH budget. It's understandable that she takes special note of the NINR's tiny allocation—she was the institute's first Director.

One problem caused by media images that rarely portray nurses as knowledgeable or scientific is that, when presenting the need for nursing research to policymakers and others, advocates have to overcome strong stereotypes.

"Oh, yes, I think so. I definitely think so. You have to give a lot of examples. You have to talk through with them what it means to be a nurse doing research," Dr. Hinshaw says.

But isn't the point of health care research the same, whether it's done by physicians or nurses?

"We are both concerned about the patient. But just what we are concerned about is very different," she explains.

"Medicine focuses on the disease condition. Doctors are fantastic at understanding basic science mechanisms, understanding treatments, surgeries, etc., that are needed for particular diagnoses. Nurses do not focus on that. We take that knowl-

edge from our colleagues, but what we focus on is how and what does the patient need to do to deal with the disease that they have.

"So for example, with someone who has had surgery, we are less focused on the surgery than on the possibility of complications from the surgery, or pain issues that need to be controlled, because pain decreases healing, or fatigue levels, or how to get someone up and get them moving, because if you don't, they are going to get thrombosis."

Distinctions Muddled

And those distinctions between the areas of expertise of nurses and physicians are muddled by TV shows that depict physicians providing nursing care and nurses doing...well...not much of anything. These images also permeate the media environments of today's teens.

Pamela J. (P.J.) Haylock, RN, MA, who is a past President of the Oncology Nursing Society, sometimes speaks to groups of middle-school girls as part of a program of the American Association of University Women. The presentations are intended to encourage girls to stay interested in math and science.

"When I talk about some of the things I've been able to do as a nurse, these girls are just amazed," Haylock said. "They say, 'I didn't know nurses could do that' or 'I didn't know you had to do that to be a nurse.' They have just such an unrealistic perspective on nurses."

That ignorance is really not surprising when you consider that young TV viewers are bathed in images of physicians doing everything, including nursing. Haylock points to a scene in a recent episode of *House*, for example, in which one of the physicians spent all day with a dying patient. Then after the

This is the second of a three-part series. Part I appeared in the April 10th issue.

man died, the doctor was shown carefully removing tubes and monitor leads and washing the man's skin. The scene was full of emotion and respect. To Haylock, that scene carried a clear message: Doctors do it all, so who needs nurses?

"Nurses are doing important things, and it's just too bad that people don't see that," she said.



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One Show from the '60s that Was Different

She remembers that when she was young, there was one primetime series that was different.

The Nurses aired on CBS from 1962 to 1965. Dr. Kalisch's media research demonstrates just how different this series was. One study tracked the image of nursing on TV from 1950 to 1980, including 28 series with nurse characters. The high point came in the



Ada Sue Hinshaw, PhD, RN: "Physicians and nurses are both concerned about the patient. But just what we are concerned about is very different. Medicine focuses on the disease condition....For example, with someone who has had surgery, nurses are less focused on the surgery than on the possibility of complications, or pain issues that need to be controlled, because pain decreases healing, or fatigue levels, or how to get someone up and get them moving, because if you don't, they are going to get thrombosis."



Beatrice Kalisch, PhD, RN, FAAN, said that in the course of her research on the impact of federal funding on nursing, she was startled by comments about nursing she heard from Senators and Representatives: "Their image of nursing, based largely on media portrayals, was so off-base it was alarming." Thus began her efforts to document and understand the dearth of strong nurse characters on TV and in other media. She and colleagues embarked on detailed analyses of shows stretching back to the 1950s.

1960s, largely due to *The Nurses*.

Dr. Kalisch and her colleagues wrote that the character of Liz Thorpe, head nurse of a busy New York City hospital was "the single best image of the professional nurse in television history." They added, "This series presented nursing as a vital and exciting profession and nurse characters as compassionate, warm, and caring as well as intelligent, assertive, self-directed, and committed."

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Although some other shows sometimes portrayed strong nurse characters, they often came with negative overtones. For example, Major Houlihan on *M*A*S*H* was technically competent, but she was portrayed as rigid and unfeeling. And even Major Houlihan ended up playing second fiddle to the physician characters. Not so on *The Nurses*.

"There wasn't a major physician character dominating on that show. The nurses were the main characters," Dr. Kalisch says. "In so many of these portrayals, it looks like physicians are in charge of nurses; but in this case it was clear that nurses were in charge of nurses. There were nurse managers."

Nurses took care of patients and were at the center of dramatic situations.

"They made a difference. They were shown making a difference. And having a brain, being intelligent, being prepared to do what they do, educated.

It was just a whole different world," she says.

But that different world didn't last. Dr. Ben Casey, Dr. Marcus Welby, and others reasserted physician command of the airwaves.

"Now nursing is pretty much done by physicians in the media. That's what you see. People don't understand that. They think, 'I'll be a doctor and that's what I do.' But that isn't what you'll do. So we still have a problem," Dr. Kalisch says.

Dr. Kalisch and others say a funny thing happened to nurses as television

adapted to the changing roles of women in society. Writers wanted to have both men and women in their casts, even as they moved away from the rigid stereotypes of male doctors and female nurses.

"It used to be that the female characters in these shows were nurses. Now they are physicians," Dr. Kalisch says.

As a result, Dr. Kalisch observes, nurses have largely disappeared from medical shows. □

Next time: Talking with a star of *The Nurses*.

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Please see Brief Summary of full Prescribing Information on following page.

Reference: 1. NOXAFIL® (posaconazole) Prescribing Information. Schering-Plough Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, October 2006.

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