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Viewpoint: To solve nursing shortage, change attitudes about nurses

By Sandy Summers
May 12, 2009

Today is International Nurses Day. This year, amid much talk of health care reform, there is cause for hope that the U.S. government may soon do more to address the nursing crisis. But to really help nurses - and in so doing, help everyone - we must meet a bigger challenge: changing our own preconceptions about what nurses do.

How bad is the crisis? According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the nation is currently short 116,000 nurses, which is predicted to worsen to 500,000 by 2025. In Maryland, hospitals are short 2,300 nurses, and that could increase to 10,000 by 2017.

President Barack Obama has honored nurses, recalling their efforts when his daughter Sasha had meningitis. He has called for more nurse educators, included nurses in discussion of health reform, and appointed nurse Mary Wakefield to head the Health Resources and Services Administration. The new federal stimulus package and budget both include significant funding increases for programs aimed at the nursing shortage.

These are promising developments. But meaningful, long-term change will require us to reconsider some of our common ideas about nursing. Many people still believe that nurses are subordinate, scut-work saints, rather than professionals with critical-thinking skills honed by years of college-level education. Likewise, most Americans remain convinced that serious health care necessarily revolves around physicians.

Yet today, 3 million registered nurses play a central role in U.S.

health care, saving lives and improving outcomes countless times every day. They assess patients' conditions and autonomously intervene, coordinate work by the health care team, use cutting-edge technology to protect patients, and teach patients how to manage their conditions.

The nursing shortage is a public health crisis, one that has killed thousands of patients. Now is the time to change attitudes about nursing. For nursing to attain the resources it needs to get and keep nurses at the bedside, the public must learn what nurses really do.

The media plays a key role in forming and reinforcing popular attitudes. A growing body of research confirms that television shows in particular affect viewers' attitudes and decisions about health care matters, including nursing.

What does the public learn about nursing in the media? Occasionally it gets an insightful look at what nurses really do. Examples include a few episodes in the final years of NBC's hospital drama ER, and an excellent 2007 piece in The Wall Street Journal about editor John Blanton's experiences as a new burn unit nurse.

But far more often, what the public sees in the media confirms harmful stereotypes about nursing. This discourages potential and practicing nurses, and undermines their claims to the resources they so urgently need.

Take popular network TV dramas, like Fox's House and ABC's Grey's Anatomy and Private Practice. These shows are dominated by physicians, and physician characters do many exciting things that nurses do in real life, from defibrillation to patient teaching to psychosocial care. Nurse characters are wrongly portrayed as subordinates who move objects and take orders. The smart, attractive physician characters sometimes mock nurses.

In general, television news, documentaries, and daytime shows also ignore nurses' contributions, feeding viewers a diet of all-physicians-all-the-time. The print press is better, but it still tends to equate what physicians do with all of health care. And it usually

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consults only physicians, even about health topics that nurses know at least as well.


Even advertising reinforces the old stereotypes. In many ads, physicians are smart and commanding; nurses are deferential helpers and/or sex objects.

We must educate ourselves about what nurses do - and "we" includes the elites who craft public policy and media content. They should try to raise awareness of nursing, and listen to nurses' ideas about improving health care. And nurses must speak out about their work.

Let's celebrate nurses day every day by making the only change that will ensure nurses are there when we need them: Let's reconsider the value of what nurses do.

Sandy Summers, a Baltimore resident, is the executive director of The Truth About Nursing, and co-author of the new book, "Saving Lives: Why The Media's Portrayal Of Nurses Puts Us All At Risk." Her e-mail is ssummers@truthaboutnursing.org.




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