Why the Media’s Portrayal of Nursing—Past and Present—Puts Us All at Risk: How We Can Change the Future

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Research shows that health care errors are the third leading cause of death in the US, costing a trillion dollars every year. Though nurses identify and prevent most errors, they do not yet have the authority and resources needed to prevent the remainder — in large part because of prevailing power structures.

Since 2001, Sandy Summers, RN, MSN, MPH, founder and executive director of the Truth About Nursing, has shown nurses around the world how we can work together to strengthen nursing’s role in the health care setting, in policy-making, and in our society. Sandy explores overlooked roots of the nursing crisis such as media products that have long shaped and reinforced inaccurate perceptions about the nature of nursing work.

The most influential media rarely conveys the importance of nursing, often showing physicians doing the valuable work that nurses really do and presenting nurses as stereotypes: unskilled handmaidens, female sex objects, angels, or battleaxes. Public health research shows that even entertainment media products have a significant effect on how people think and act with regard to health care. But today too few decision-makers, from government to the private sector to the public at large, know that nurses are skilled professionals who save lives and improve outcomes. Resources flow accordingly.

By reconsidering how society thinks and acts toward nursing, we empower nurses to improve patient safety, reduce turnover, and enhance public health. We must increase the public’s understanding of nursing. And only nurses can make that happen.

Summers has Masters Degrees in Nursing and Public Health from Johns Hopkins University (2002). She received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Southern Connecticut State University in 1984. Her work has been covered widely in the lay media on television programs, such as CNN and 20/20, as a guest on myriad radio shows, and in many hundreds of articles in the print media from the Associated Press to United Press International and from the New York Times to the Times of India.

Summers will offer innovative strategies to help nurses reach out to the media and the public. By increasing the value our society places on nursing, we can improve public health and nurses’ own wellbeing. We can make the image of nursing that of a profession that is second to none.