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Provocative Nursing: The Medias Damaging Portrayal of Nurses

Due to the nature of today's technologically advanced society, what is shown in the media, specifically on television, has a bigger impact than it has ever had in the past. At quick glance this is not necessarily a bad thing, until the line of reality and drama is blurred on television. One of the most common example of this is seen in popular American medical drama shows. While medical dramas might appear very representative of the medical and healthcare profession, once the truth behind what profession actually does what is revealed, which I will discuss throughout this paper, these shows can be very misleading. Shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *ER*, *House*, and *Scrubs* all have some real features, like equipment used and disease diagnosis, but when it comes to the way they portray nurses, or do not portray nurses, the shows become extremely inaccurate. Due to these televisions shows rarely showing nurses, or only showing them having an extremely small role, potential nurses may be deterred from the nursing profession. Not only this, but when the media does portray nurses, they are only portrayed as having a negative role in the profession. Nursing is one of the major parts of the healthcare profession, and the fact that these shows rarely even show nurses having roles undermines the job of a nurse. Also, when these popular American television shows are showing nurses, they seem to display them as unimportant, undereducated, and promiscuous individuals. This is a

huge problem in society that needs serious attention. The way American television shows portray nurses is directly linked to society's view of the nursing profession, and this view threatens to devalue nurses, causing less support for them and leading to the nursing shortage.

The whole reason this topic is of huge importance to all of society is because of the nursing shortage. The nursing shortage is not a new occurrence, rather it has been increasing for many years, and it has had dangerous effects. The authors of the book *Saving Lives*, Harry and Sandy Summers, state that "Since the late 1990s, the world has experienced one the longest and worst nursing shortages in modern history. The shortage has had a devastating effect on patient outcomes-literally killing thousands, if not millions, of people every year" (Summers, 2009, p.13). This quote by Summers not only addresses the nursing shortage but also the dangers of it. As mentioned before, nurses have many different jobs one of the big ones being keeping patients safe, healthy, and alive. But if there are no nurses to do these things, the hospitals and the health of the world is in trouble. Also, not having enough nurses leads to understaffing, which in turn can cause increase stress and anxiety on nurses that are employed. It may even lead them to resent their job and quite until conditions improve. Summers touches on this point as well by indicating that "These conditions drive away many nurses who could no longer face their growing burnout and the realization that they could not meet their professional responsibilities to their patients" (Summers, 2009, p.15). This was made evident in 2004 when roughly half a million U.S. registered nurses chose not to work in nursing anymore due to the conditions (Summers, 2009, p.15). To put it in another way, the nursing shortage leads to understaffing which causes many nurses to resent and quit their job, leading to an even worse nursing shortage. One problem that comes into play by trying to fix the nursing shortage is the necessary

prolonged education. It takes hard work and diligent studying for typically four years, and then one must pass their exit exam to begin practicing. This time consuming process is causing issues due to the high number of retirees of the baby boomer age. Due to the retiring workforce and poor retention, it is forecasted that nurses will be in a recruitment crisis by 2020, unless effective strategies are put in place (Norman, 2015, p.12). Furthermore, there needs to be some way that health care can positively recruit students into the nursing profession. Without recruitment of future nurses, there will be no nurses after the current nurses have stopped working and retired. Throughout this paper I will discuss the different ways the media is influencing the nursing profession and actions that must be taken to bring a stop to it.

Before the negative stereotypes that exclude people from joining the nursing profession can be addressed, one must first examine what it is a nurse actually does. To begin, a nurse can be defined as a person who “promotes health, prevents illness, and follows a holistic practice model emphasizing a wide-angle view of health with a strong focus on preventative care” (Summers, 2009, p.4). Unfortunately, after watching one of the medical dramas mentioned before, it might seem like nurses do nothing but trivial tasks. However, nurses have an essential role. This role is not just recognized by nurses, but also in books, which this quote further explains. “Nurses save lives every day. But the media usually ignores their vital role in healthcare” (Summers, 2009, p.vii). This is a powerful quote found in Sandy and Harry Summers book. Although the media does not give nurses the credit they deserve, they still have a larger role than simply following orders, bathing patients, and messing up what the doctor is trying to accomplish (a common theme of *Grey’s Anatomy*). Sandy and Harry, in the introduction to this book, examine all the ways the media gets nursing wrong. The first, arguably most important,

way is by making the assumptions that nurses do nothing. Nursing is a professional career, and what qualifies it to be called this is the prolonged education, the orientation upon service, the requirement of ongoing research, the code of conduct, the ability to practice autonomously, and the operation under a professional organization (Berman, 2012, p.19). All these qualities are important in qualifying nursing as a profession, but one of these qualities deserves to be reviewed more in-depth. This quality is the idea of autonomy, or practicing autonomously.

Autonomy is simply defined as independence. Because nurses are professionals they have the ability to practice independently. This means nurses are not constantly being told what to do by doctors, and waiting for their every order. In fact, nurses do not even work under a physician, but rather in conjunction with them. Nurses are actually constantly assessing, diagnosing, planning, implementing, and evaluating their patients under their own supervision, while being managed by the senior nurse. The main interactions that occur between doctor and nurse are to discuss what the nurse has discovered, and for the doctor to use all this information to come up with a medical diagnosis. Some other actions that nurses are responsible for include catching and halting life-threatening infections, coordinating the care provided by other health professionals, protecting patients from inferior care, running new health systems for underserved communities, providing most of the care given by aid groups like Doctors Without Borders, and managing violent patients alone until security arrives (Summers, 2009, p.7-8). These actions are not the only things nurses are accountable for, but this simple and brief list gets my point across. Some of the more common jobs that nurses are in charge of, that are typically shown in medical dramas being done by doctors, include starting IVs, taking vitals, administering medication, giving shots, interacting directly with the patient (patient care), and participating in wound care. So being a

nurse is more than just a job. It is more than just getting in the way of doctors and simply pushing patients on gurneys. It is important that people realize the enormous role that nurses play in taking care of patients. Nurses do a lot more than society thinks, and that can be proved by examining the way the media is constantly depicting nurses.

Before jumping into what is common in today's society when it comes to media's portrayal of nursing, it is important to look at the history behind the portrayals of nursing. Nursing was not always characterized negatively. Florence Nightingale, the British nurse who is called the "mother of nursing," was extremely influential during the Crimean War in providing care to wounded soldiers in Constantinople. Not only did she reform the practice of nursing, but she also put pressure on the government to develop better conditions for soldiers and she even developed a three month schooling program for individuals who wanted to become nurses. Nightingale gained the nickname "angel of mercy" and "lady with the lamp" in response to her round the clock, day and night, care for her patients. Due to Nightingale's many advances, nurses gained positive stereotypes such as angels, saviors, and devout individuals. But despite these advances made, the negative stereotype of nurses slowly developed as time went on.

Nursing is constantly being misrepresented in the media and in popular American television shows. There are many stereotypes that surround nursing when it is portrayed and these include things like the "sex object," "female only profession," and "the individuals in the hospitals who do nothing helpful but get in the way." By doing extensive research on my topic I believe that the reason for these negative portrayals is due to the fact that nursing is not seen as a profession. Nurses are educated individuals who go through a strenuous schooling program in order to obtain a degree and become a licensed professional. They are educated at colleges by

other nursing scholars, and “hundreds of thousands of nurses have graduate degrees in nursing, and an increasing number have doctorates in nursing science” (Summers, 2009, p.5). In other words, nurses are highly educated and intelligent individuals. So to have the common stereotype of “unintelligent individual” completely goes against what all nurses and nursing students have worked their butts off to achieve.

One common stereotype of nursing includes the idea of nurses as sex objects. This is a common portrayal that Summers discusses in her book. A quote I came across while reading Summers’ book that talks about this image is as followed, “The image of the naughty nurse is a common cultural reference” (Summers, 2009, p.136). According to Summers, the whole naughty nurse image was developed due to the fact that nursing is a predominantly female occupation, consisting of women often working in intimate situations with male patients. In other words, female nurses were taking care of male patients by giving them baths and treating their wounds, which was sometimes seen as risqué. So this began the whole image of the “naughty nurse” providing care to men. This is why majority of the time nurses are portrayed as attractive, skinny, and single sexual females. In today’s society, the naughty nurse image can be seen in advertisements (typically beer commercials), television shows and movies, and adult and Halloween store costumes. The naughty nurse stereotype is frequently seen around Halloween as women dress up as “naughty nurses” in skimpy costumes.

Now this portrayal of nursing is not just simply inappropriate, but it is also dangerous. One reason the naughty nurse stereotype is dangerous is because “if a profession is constantly associated with female sexuality, it is not going to attract and retain many men” (Summers, 2009, p.139). This simply means that based on the way nursing is portrayed, in this case as a sexualized

profession, will prevent men from desiring to be a part of the nursing profession. This leads to a shortage of male nurses, and it can even lead to negative attitudes by the public towards male nurses working today. The second reason this stereotype is dangerous is because society will develop a false representation that nurses are sex objects which can cause nurses to be sexually harassed and abused by their patients. An example of this is in a study done that Summers included in her book. This quote stated that “In December 2005 study, University of Missouri communications professor Debbie Dougherty found that more than 70 percent for the nurses she surveyed in four states had been sexually harassed by patients” (Summers, 2009, p.135). This is a shocking fact to comprehend. Not only that, but it is upsetting to know that due to these sexual portrayal of nurses, nurses are being harassed, sexually assaulted, and abused.

Moving on, the second stereotype of nurses as a female only profession can lead to many issues, the main one being lack of male nurses. Now not only are nurses not given due recognition by society for their job and many skills, but also they are rarely ever portrayed as hardworking men (Hoeve, 2015, p.296). Nursing has always and continues to suffer from gender stereotypes. It is extremely rare to see a nurse portrayed as a male in medical dramas. A great example of this is in the show *Hawthorne*, which aired in 2009. This show focused on the role of the head registered nurse at a hospital. Due to the fact that this show is solely focused on the role of nurses, one might believe that the portrayal of this profession would be closely related to the real practice, and include different genders and races of nurses, but instead out of all the nurses at this hospital there was only one male nurse. This nurse was constantly being confused for a doctor, and he even pretended to be a doctor in one episode to impress a patient. Another ridiculous scene was when a patient found out the male nurse was a doctor, he immediately

called him stupid and asked if he decided to be a nurse because he failed med school. This is also another common stereotype that is seen throughout medical dramas and sadly can even influence society's view of male nurses today. In a study done by Ohlen and Segesten in 1998, they demonstrated that male nurses experience uncertainty from other people as a result of stereotyped images (Hoeve, 2015, p.298). In other words these scenes throughout movies and shows that degrade male nurses and talk down to them, are only feeding society's unintentional negative opinion of male nurses.

Now male nurses are usually depicted in many ways. Typically if male nurses are portrayed they are either feminine, unintelligent, or a med school dropout. Male nurses are rarely ever portrayed as individuals who had a desire to be a part of the nursing profession. There is also a scene similar to the above example in the movie Meet the Parents, where nurse Bob is meeting his wife's family for the first time. In this scene two of the family members at the dinner table are employed in the medical profession. One of the family members was a doctor and the other was a surgeon, and when told that Bob is in the medical field as well they ask him what kind of doctor he is. Bob informs the two family members that he is a nurse and both of them burst out into laughter, asking him to stop "joking around." Scenes like this can be seen all throughout the media, making a mockery of male nurses. This needs to be stopped because no one wants to be a part of a profession that is constantly being made fun of. This, once again, is a common contributor to the shortage of male nurses.

Nursing is seen as a predominately female profession by the majority of the population, and this is leading to an intense shortage in male nurses. This idea is backed up in Hoeve's discussion paper when she says that "The nursing profession: public image, self-concept and

professional identity.” Hoeve also states that “Nursing is still seen as a feminine, caring, sub-professional occupation rather than a profession” (Hoeve, 2015, p.304). This is a big deal when it comes to representation of nurses in the media. There needs to be awareness brought to the media about the truth behind male nurses. Male nurses are educated individuals, who studied hours and hours throughout nursing school to pass their NCLEX, National Council Licensure Examination, so they can practice nursing in a safe and professional way. Male nurses along with female nurses are professionals, and should not be looked upon any differently in hospital settings. The media needs to make a more deliberate attempt to portray not only nursing but especially male nursing in a more positive light. There needs to be awareness brought to society about the truth behind what it is like to be a male nurse. Then, just maybe, there will be a dramatic increase in male nurses, leading to the end of the nursing shortage.

Another portrayal of nurses that must be addressed is the absence of nurses. Shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *House* rarely show nurses doing anything, if they are even portrayed; rather, they show surgeons and doctors doing everything a nurse does. A quote that shows the nature of these shows is as follows, “*Grey's Anatomy* and *House* have attacked nursing more aggressively than any U.S. television shows in decades” (Summers, 2009, p.68). Because of this quote by Summers, it is important to address some of the issues of the show that are attacking the nursing profession. First, *Grey's Anatomy* is a show centered on intelligent and attractive surgeon stars providing all significant care to their patients. The problem with *Grey's Anatomy* is the almost complete absence of nurses, and the fact that the show stresses that smart, tough, attractive women, like its surgeon stars, do not become nurses (Summers, 2009, p.69). Due to the extreme popularity of *Grey's Anatomy* and the fact that it is watched by an estimated 8.9 million viewers

according to ABC, this idea is extremely damaging to the nursing profession because the more people that watch the show, the more people gathering false ideas of the nursing profession. One scene in particular, in the very first episode, that insults the nursing profession is when surgeon Alex tells female surgeon Meredith Grey that he hates nurses, but she thinks he is calling her a nurse. The scene escalates by Alex saying “Well, if the white cap fits” further angering Meredith as she storms off disgusted. This scene shows the type of negative view linked with being a nurse. The characters Alex and Meredith act as if nursing is a shameful job to have. This scene not only belittles nursing, but it also completely insults everything nurses work to build.

In the show *House*, the comments made about nurses are done a little differently than *Grey's Anatomy*. Instead of depicting nurses and making negative remarks towards them, Gregory House, the main character and doctor in this popular medical drama, clearly states early on in the series that he does not “do nurses.” Now in *House* nurses are rarely shown in the hospital, or if they are shown they are, once again, doing some tedious task. On one episode that aired in 2005, House and his assistant physician suggested that they considered nurses unskilled cleanup staff, good for handling stool and patients who have fallen down (Summers, 2009, p.73). This is even further enforced in another episode where a patient on a hard medication fell in the hallway and House responded by saying “This is exactly why I created nurses. Clean up on aisle three.” Now the representation of nursing here is not hard to pick up on. Just by watching episodes of *House*, people can begin to gather their own interpretations on what they think nursing is about. It is rare to find a medical drama that depicts nursing in a positive light, and although some might believe this is not a serious issue, it can be detrimental to society's attitudes toward nurses.

One counterclaim that is common towards this argument that the media is affecting the nursing profession is, “It is just drama,” or “no one believes that stuff anyway.” Now although these may seem like decent arguments, they are completely false. When scientists have looked in-depth into the brain and how humans process things into their subconscious, it becomes clear that people must be careful of what they watch and of the things they are exposed to. The whole business of mass media is based on affecting how and what people think (“Truth about Nursing”, 2015, p.1). The media has been doing this for many years, and they are amazing at it, so it is unreasonable for people to believe they can simply disregard things that they watch on television. The brain, as amazing as it is, works in ways people cannot truly and fully understand, and is constantly receiving and storing visual stimuli. As people watch television, viewers tend to internalize messages and signals at conscious and subconscious levels (“Truth about Nursing”, 2015, p.1). When people store messages in their subconscious levels they do not even realize they are doing so, but these messages secretly motivate their actions, beliefs, and opinions. So when people watch hospital dramas, they are constantly storing different ideas and things they see done in the hospital into their subconscious thought. Hospital dramas provide an opportunity for viewers to learn specifically what goes on at the center of high-intensity medicine that a news report cannot clearly show (“Truth about Nursing”, 2015, p.2). This is not completely a negative thing, because it brings some awareness to what typically goes down in hospitals and gives a brief representation of how the health care system works. However, when hospital shows take the drama aspect too far, the line between what really happens and what is pretend is easily blurred. So when a person is watching television images, ideas are processed into our brain about the different stimuli they interpret. Some people take these images and relate them to the real

world, and believe them to be true, while others disregard certain images. However, whether people disregard some images or accept others, everything that is seen on the television is processed into our brain, and is moved into our subconscious. This makes the media's portrayal of nurses on popular medical dramas important. If nurses are constantly being talked down to, abused, and stereotyped, the viewer of this show is going to begin to start having negative connotations towards nurses and the nursing profession. This negative image of nursing leads to more people disregarding the nursing occupation as a desirable career, which in turn will impact the nursing shortage tremendously.

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, because of the nursing shortage there needs to be actions taken to recruit more nurses. One way that future nurses could be recruited would be through the media, especially in today's technologically advanced society. Reaching out to the teenagers of today is important in impacting the nursing profession. Media must make nursing a more desired profession by portraying it in a more positive and realistic light. But the media cannot just fix its image of nurses overnight. Nurses and other healthcare professionals must take charge and educate the media on what is right and what is wrong when it comes to nursing. There are many television shows that would love, and that do, have health care professionals on the side trying to ensure a realistic portrayal of what happens in hospitals. This is one way nurses can get involved and work towards a more accurate portrayal of nursing. Because of the vast possibilities of the media, it can easily rebuild the image of the nursing profession, and this is already being seen in United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom there has been a dramatic increase in male students applying for nursing programs believed to be associated with the popular BBC drama, *Casualty*. This show emphasizes the skillful aspect of

nursing work, while at the same time highlights men in central nursing roles. This is a fantastic example of the positive influence the media can have on society.

Now in order to promote better images of nursing in the media, a few actions must be taken. One thing that must be done to fix the image of nursing is to implement a dramatic drawback in the outdated and inaccurate stereotypes of nurses. Author of the journal written about nursing on television, Roslyn Weaver, believes that “These popular stereotypes may enhance or alternatively damage the appeal of nursing for potential students, and commend or denigrate the value and status of the profession” (Weaver et al., 2015, p.2636). This, in turn, leads to a shortage of nurses because there will not be a sufficient amount of students applying to attend nursing school. Next, there needs to be a call to action from nurses, standing up for themselves instead of letting “Hollywood” walk all over the profession. By nurses speaking up and educating people about what their job is actually all about, there will be an increase in interest for nursing as a desirable career, and people will begin to respect the career more. But it is not enough for nurses to just sit around and do nothing about this situation. This is a topic that Hoeve touches on a bunch, and even says that “As long as nurses do not feel responsible for the distorted images of the roles they have performed and are still performing in health care and as long as they do not take a stand to correct these images, their invisibility will continue” (Hoeve, 2015, p.305). If nurses want to see an improvement in the way the media is portraying their profession they must take a stand.

Now recently nurses have taken a stand to defend their profession. During the 2015 September Miss America Beauty pageant, Miss Colorado, for her talent, did a monologue about her job as a nurse while wearing her scrubs and stethoscope. After this competition aired, The

View, (an American morning talk show hosted by women who address different issues that are seen in the world and more commonly the media,) had a few words to say about the pageant. Co-host Joy Behar made a comment about Miss Colorado wearing a “doctor’s uniform.” This sparked backlash all over the country. Nurses were standing up and posting images all over social media about what it is they do and why they wear a “doctor’s uniform.” There were even doctors defending nurses and the importance of nurses in the hospital. This comment by The View caused them to lose many viewers, and major advertisers like Johnson & Johnson and Egglund’s Best. Although The View later apologized for the comment, the backlash did not stop nurses from all over the country coming together to bring awareness to their profession. This incident not only informed many people of what nurses do and their importance, but it also showed what happens when nurses come together to defend their profession and all they have worked so hard for.

This recent incident displays the impact that nurses can have on society when they stand up for their profession. The media is going to continue to do what it has always done, and that is influence society by what it shows and portrays on a regular basis. That is the sole purpose of the media. So it is important, whether or not the media image of nursing changes, for all nurses, doctors, nursing students, and anyone else in the healthcare profession to stand up and educate society on what it is nurses do. Florence Nightingale did not work as hard as she did for nursing to be belittled or blown off as an unimportant job. She fought so that nurses would be respected and treated as professionals. So the stereotypes that surround nursing must be put to death. Nurses must not influence these stereotypes or accept them. This can simply mean not reinforcing the “naughty nurse” image, whether by throwing away old Halloween costumes or

bringing awareness to the abuse that happens to nurses due to this image. Sometimes it takes making society uncomfortable in order for people listen up. Also, male nurses must take a stand and be fully involved in the recruitment process. Educate students, write columns in the paper, be apart of job fairs, whatever it takes to bring awareness to nursing. Nursing must not be looked at as a female-only occupation. Do not be afraid to write television shows to express anger or disappointment in their portrayal of the nursing profession, in order to bring about a change. Whatever it takes to positively promote nursing, must be done. So in writing this paper, my wishes are I have influenced someone to go and speak out in favor for the nursing profession and all it stands for. To go and change the world and positively influence the view of nurses. And to, hopefully, address the media and the portrayal of nurses so that change can be brought about, and so there will no longer be the fear of a nursing shortage. Be the change and be the difference in the nursing profession.