

Position Paper

The Image of Nurses

Nurses are highly skilled and educated professionals, who are dedicated to caring for their patients/residents/clients. As the front-line caregivers and educators, they are instrumental in improving patient/resident/client outcomes using their advanced knowledge. As such, the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) is committed to ensuring the image projected of nurses in advertising and by the media is a positive one, reflecting our true value to our profession, our health care system, and, most important of all, our patients/residents/clients.

Backgrounder

Unfortunately, the image depicted by advertisers and the media has not always been accurate or flattering. Long gone is the image of nurses in the 1940s and 1950s as professionals, selflessly committed to their vocation and to their nation – “angels of mercy,” as they were known. That was replaced in the 1960s, egged on by the emergence of television medical dramas and films, such as the British *Carry On* series, as “doctors’ handmaidens,” “battleaxes,” and most prominent of all, “sex kittens” (so-called “naughty nurses”) – images that, sadly, persist today.

More often than not, today’s advertisers, in an attempt to sell their products, portray nurses as female, well-endowed, sexy, young, ditzy, white and blonde, adorned in nursing caps that were phased out years ago, and revealing uniforms resembling little more than lingerie. For example, in the spring of 2005, Virgin Mobile Canada widely used scantily-clad “nurses” to promote their cell phones in a series of print ads. Cadbury Schweppes Canada aired a commercial on television and movie screens in the fall of 2007 for its Dentyne Ice chewing gum, showing a pretty young nurse in a revealing uniform, who was clearly sexually available to her patient at the press of a call button. In the same commercial, an older nurse was depicted as

someone quite unappealing to her patient.

The influential television medium doesn’t generally portray nurses with any degree of accuracy either. Most of today’s medical dramas don’t focus on nurses, as they appear to have no significant role in patient care. Physicians are shown spending half their time conducting key care tasks that nurses actually perform, while nurses, as their peripheral subordinates, stare at them with adoration and admiration (if they are present in the scene at all). The message is that nurses only exist to help patients reach physicians, who have the real expertise. And as for men, they are virtually non-existent in on-screen nursing roles.

The depiction of nurses by the media has generally fared a little better, but it is clear that most journalists, who are exposed to the same advertisements and television shows as the rest of us, don’t really have a thorough understanding of what it means to be a nurse. They don’t always comprehend, as evident in their reporting, that nurses, just as doctors, make life and death decisions every day and perform countless front-line tasks. They rarely discuss how involved a nurse is in political action events and don’t appear to fully comprehend that by lobbying the government and employers for needed changes, nurses are actually trying to improve our health care system and, therefore, the level of care they can provide to their patients/residents/clients. We still have a long way to go to promote our patient advocacy role.

While the suppliers of the harmful nursing stereotypes generally take the stand that their depictions of nurses are simply “jokes,” not to be taken seriously, ONA’s view is that advertisers and the media can and do have an impact on the public’s perceptions and play a very important role in exploiting or enhancing the image of nurses. While poll after poll shows that nurses are one of the most trusted professionals in the

country, we see advertisers continue to fuse lingerie with nurses' work uniforms in popular media images, for example, and expose sexy nurses in these images, which associates the profession with sex in the public's mind. And suggesting that nurses are primarily sex objects in turn conveys the idea that nursing work consists of satisfying the sexual needs of patients/residents/clients and/or physicians or, at best, is so unimportant that nurses have the time and energy to focus on sex while on the job.

These are not the images generally associated with serious professionals. At a time when we are grappling with a devastating worldwide nursing shortage, ONA believes these portrayals discourage people from entering and remaining in the profession and diminish the worth of nurses to the very people for whom they care. We are also concerned that health care decision makers – many of whom are poorly informed about what nurses really do to begin with – are less likely to devote resources to a profession that has become so devalued, especially after going home at night and watching an episode of “Grey’s Anatomy” or “ER,” where nurses make out with physicians in the supply closet, flirt with patients and are often the butt of the joke.

The ONA Statement of Beliefs

The ONA *Statement of Beliefs* – a set of goals to guide our organization – is very clear on how our members must be treated. It states that every ONA member “has the right to be treated with dignity and respect.” It’s more difficult to garner that respect when advertisers are constantly showcasing nurses as little more than sexy female bimbos, and journalists only report on small components of a very detailed and responsible job.

What the College of Nurses of Ontario Says

The College of Nurses of Ontario’s (CNO) practice standards documents state, “...nurses have a duty to uphold themselves in a manner that reflects well on the profession, and to participate in and promote the growth of the profession” (*Practice Standard: Ethics*), and that, “...nurses are responsible for effectively establishing and maintaining the limits or boundaries in the therapeutic nurse-client relationship” (*Practice Standard: Therapeutic Nurse-Client Relationship*). The expectation is that nurses refrain from any conduct that is considered to be disgraceful, dishonourable or unprofessional. To conduct themselves in a manner frequently depicted by the media would have

serious consequences for nurses with their employers and the College.

And while the CNO has no formal policy on the image of nurses in the media, it has contacted advertisers in the past regarding their use of nurse imagery, with two main concerns: advertisers or members of the public who either intentionally or not hold themselves out as nurses without being College members; and advertisers who use sexist or denigrating images of nurses to sell products, thereby offending the profession as a whole. In instances where a non-nurse is intentionally portrayed as a real nurse in an advertisement, the CNO will call for a “cease and desist” and will follow up if the ad is not withdrawn.

Improving the Image of Nurses

All nurses, as professionals and members of the CNO, have a responsibility to conduct themselves in a manner which is in keeping with the role of the nurse and the CNO’s standards. But as the union representing Ontario nurses, ONA has an important part to play in enhancing the image and reputation of nurses to challenge and dispute misconceptions, to show nursing as an attractive career, to empower nurses and publicize what they do, to urge nurses to “sell” our profession to future generations, to encourage more respect for our profession and to raise the public voice and profile of nurses.

ONA’s view is that education is key. At every opportunity, ONA speaks, and will continue to speak, to the media and the public about the real work that nurses perform, including our advocacy work on behalf of patients/residents/clients, and encourage the media to cover the full range of nursing. Nurses are notorious for not tooting our own horns, but we must recognize ourselves as the health professionals we are and step forward to utilize our knowledge and expertise to educate the media and the public.

It is also our position that nurses must be integrated into public policy development and decision making at all levels of health care organizations and government, and we will continue to lobby for such. We have important things to say about improvements to patient/resident/client care, our work environments and the health care system as a whole, and we must be heard. Respect is earned by offering solutions to difficult situations and leading the way to a better place.

The true depiction of nurses, of both sexes and all

ages, races and body types, will remain in the forefront of all ONA publications, campaigns and advertising. And in cases where a nurse is portrayed in a negative, inappropriate, inaccurate or insulting light in an external advertisement, ONA will contact the advertiser, broadcaster and the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council to explain why the ad is offensive to nurses and demand that it immediately be withdrawn. Using this tactic, we were successful in having the Dentyne Ice gum ad withdrawn by Cadbury Schweppes, including a promise by the company to consult with nurses before using their image in the future.

If our efforts to have an ad withdrawn are not successful, we will call for our members, the Ontario Fed-

eration of Labour (OFL) and the general public to boycott the product being sold using negative imagery of nurses. This was our tactic in the case of Virgin Mobile.

We will never attract women into our profession if they believe the public thinks of them as little more than mindless showpieces. And the relentless stereotyping of nurses as sexy women will stop men from choosing nursing as a serious career choice as well.

We must all do our part to improve the image of nurses. That means standing tall together as a strong group of professionals. The voice that promotes nursing needs to be a collective one.