



ONA Position Statement

THE IMAGE OF NURSES

The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) is committed to advocating for the positive portrayal of nurses in advertising and media reflecting the nurse's true value to the profession, the health-care system, and, most important of all, the patients, residents and clients.

At the forefront of health care, the nurse's role extends all boundaries, as leaders, caregivers and educators, in a wide variety of professional settings. Nurses are highly skilled and educated health-care professionals, instrumental in improving patient/resident/client outcomes, using their advanced knowledge and specialized skill set. Nurses may also be responsible for supervising other health-care workers and students.

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.”

Backgrounder

The image of nurses by the general public has changed immensely over the last 20 years. There has been a marked improvement to correct the inaccurate and clichéd view of the nurse. For far too long, the image of the nurse was that of the doctor's handmaiden or a background character, rather than an integral part of the health-care team. Nursing advocacy and social media have helped to move our issues forward.

The image depicted by advertisers and the media has not always been accurate or flattering. Images of the selfless “Angels of Mercy” to “Naughty Nurses,” have largely, although not completely, moved to the sidelines; more often now, the media presents a more factual image of nurses. The increase of social media platforms has also impacted the way one can market a group of individuals. This has become more evident with the creation of individual or group posts on platforms like Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, and specifically with group-targeted hashtags. For example, if you search #nurselife, over four million images appear of nurses in their scrubs, carrying out essential medical interventions. You will also find thousands of photos praising nurses and the work they do.

The social media platform has raised awareness of nurses, the profession and the diversity of our roles, including gender roles. Social media is a source of engagement that allows people to interact with followers, and share knowledge, information, and opinions, and has increased awareness globally of nurses and the important role we play in health care. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) reinforces the nurse's role in using social media to protect professional boundaries and the image of nurses and the profession. Together, these actions have helped to enhance the positive image of nurses we have been seeing in recent years.

ONA's efforts to promote nursing and the profession led to the establishment of the Nursing Student Affiliation in 2008, by engaging students through the Canadian Nursing Students' Association. This recognizes that nursing students are the future of the profession and our union.

Journalists may not always represent that nurses, like doctors, make life-and-death decisions every day, and perform countless front-line tasks. Media reporting on the involvement of nurses in political action events may not always reflect that the link with nurses, when lobbying the government and employers for needed changes, is to improve our health-care system and, therefore, the level of care they can provide. There is still progress to be made to promote our nurse and patient advocacy role.

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 the standards of the profession, conduct themselves in a manner that reflects well on the profession, and to participate in and promote the growth of the profession" (*Practice Standards: Ethics, 2019*), 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, 2018*). The expectation of nurses from the CNO is to refrain from any conduct that is considered to be disgraceful, dishonourable or unprofessional. To conduct themselves in a contrary manner would have serious consequences for nurses with their employers and the College.

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 the profession, and to raise the public voice and profile of nurses.

Education is key. At every opportunity, ONA speaks, and will continue to speak, to the media and the public about the actual work that nurses perform, including our advocacy work on behalf of patients/residents/client. We encourage the media to cover the full range of nursing.

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 realistic depiction of nurses, regardless of gender, age, race and body type, will remain in the forefront of all ONA publications, campaigns and advertising. 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.

If our efforts to have an ad withdrawn are not successful, we will call for our members, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), other organizations and the general public to boycott the product being sold.

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.

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