The Image of Nurses and Nursing: Newspaper portrayal of events related to nurses and nursing in South Africa

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Introduction and background

• Image – how nurses are perceived by public, patients and their families

• Nurses in the USA severely under-represented in print media – quite invisible – Woodhull study on Nursing and the Media STTI (1998)
• Role and importance of newspapers:

• Sources of information for general public
• Provide forums for debate
• Inform public opinion (on newsworthy and sensational topics)
• Transmission of attitudes, perceptions and beliefs
• Shape and change stereotypes
Challenges hampering nurses’ image

• Serious shortages of nurses in public and private sectors
• Serious shortages of resources in public hospitals
• Lack of interest in nursing
• Newspaper reports affecting the visibility and public image of nursing
Research design and method

• Qualitative content analysis to determine nature of newspaper coverage of nursing in SA - not merely word counts but a rich and meaningful technique that relies on coding and categorizing data

• Description of qualitative content analysis
  ▪ Full –text newspaper database search SA media of Sabinet
  ▪ Descriptors: nurse, nursing

• 1841 newspaper reports/articles scanned
• 161 newspaper reports retrieved and analysed
Findings

Based on analysis **four themes** emerged namely

- Nursing shortage and emigration
- Declining health care system and poor working conditions
- Death, suffering, humiliation, misconduct and incompetence
- Celebration of a noble profession
Theme 1: Nursing shortage and emigration

Shortage of 15 000 nurses in Eastern Cape hospitals

Push to end nurse staff shortages

Retirees must nurse dept back to health
### Theme 1: Nursing shortage and emigration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
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</table>
| Declining number of nursing students and young professionals | ● Lack of interest in nursing  
● Closure of nursing colleges  
● Young nurses leaving |
| Exodus of nurses                                   | ● Shortage in crucial areas  
● Push and pull factors  
● Nurses leaving South Africa  
● Intention to leave  
● Reasons for emigration |
| Statistical evidence of shortage                   | ● Vacancies in public sector  
● Shortage in crucial areas  
● Agency nursing and moonlighting |
| Human resources for health                         | ● Ageing profession  
● Turnover and retention  
● Recruitment of retired nurses  
● Homecoming – return of expats  
● Re-opening of nursing colleges |
“Gauteng’s hospitals and government health clinics are bleeding into crisis, as highly skilled doctors and nurses leave the profession in droves”. (Gallagher, 2005:3).

“The South African nursing profession is currently suffering from shortages in crucial areas such as intensive care units, operating theatres, midwifery and mental health ……things cannot get worse than they are right now” Govender & Appel, 2006:6).

Steenkamp (2007:1) stated: “A huge nursing shortage has reached a critical point where the quality of healthcare is threatened, even in private hospitals” (translated from Afrikaans).

Cullinan (2009:6) stated: “Thanks to the ill-conceived decision to close a number of nursing colleges to save money during Thabo Mbeki’s presidency and migration, the rate of skilled professional nurses has dropped from 149 to 110 per 100 000 people from 1998 to 2007”
Theme 2:
Declining healthcare system and poor working conditions

- Hospitals unsafe for patients as morale of nurses sinks, says survey
- Doctors, nurses plunder hospitals
  - Patients’ fees, drugs, medical equipment, vehicles and computers go missing
- Nurse tells grim tale of being raped, having throat slit
- Nursing conditions are ‘intolerable’
## Theme 2: Declining healthcare system and poor working conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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| Public hospitals in state of collapse | ● Inadequate supplies  
                            ● Severe shortage of specialised nurses  
                            ● Lack of managerial skills  
                            ● Lack of human and material resources  
                            ● Lack of trust in DOH/Poor public health  
                            ● Lack of security at hospitals  
                            ● Verbal, physical abuse by patients and their families; sexual harassment, rape  
                            ● Occupational risks-moonlighting and working with unskilled nurses  
                            ● Risk of infection – needle stick injuries  
                            ● Inadequate staffing; Nurse-patient ratio  
                            ● Increased pressure due to violence and Aids; High patient loads  
                            ● Poor remuneration; rural allowance  
                            ● Lack of career advancement  
                            ● Working hours  
                            ● Multidisciplinary team; doctors |
| Occupational health and safety        |                                                                            |
| Excessive workload                   |                                                                            |
| Conditions of service                |                                                                            |
| Negative relationships                |                                                                            |
Theme 2: Newspaper illustrations

- At some clinics nurses were required to draw blood, give injections or handle body fluids, but no gloves were available” (Hartley, 2005:1).
- “…he suddenly just went crazy and attacked the nursing staff … although the nurses called security for help, they only arrived 10 minutes later … “ (Naidu, 2008:10).
- “We are all quite aware of how unsafe our public hospitals are as we’ve had incidents in the past of nurses being killed at work” (Denosa international relations coordinator quoted by Govender & Appel, 2006:6).
- “Nurses spoke about an often overwhelming feeling of hopelessness in the face of the sheer size of the challenge confronting them” (Lehman & Zulu, 2005:11).
- “Public sector nurses in the Free State experience high levels of burnout and stress, leading to a deterioration in the quality of healthcare and staff shortages” (Ingber Win, 2007:7).
- “Public hospitals are no longer a safe place for patients because demotivated and underpaid nurses make mistakes” (Mabuza, 2006:6)
Theme 3:
Death, suffering, humiliation, misconduct and incompetence

Nurses drink on duty, say terrified patients

Toddler dies after nurses refuse attention

The nursing profession is going to the dogs, says DA

Report of rude, abusive nurses is disturbing
### Theme 3:
Death, suffering, humiliation, misconduct and incompetence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industrial action/strike</td>
<td>● Lack of professional values&lt;br&gt;● Patients denied access to healthcare&lt;br&gt;● Disruption of hospitals&lt;br&gt;● Shocking revelations of poor treatment&lt;br&gt;● Inhumane care; substandard care&lt;br&gt;● Infant and maternal deaths&lt;br&gt;● Limited infection control&lt;br&gt;● Moonlighting; Patients at risk due to neglect, poor nursing, de-motivated nurses; Negative attitudes&lt;br&gt;● Patients rely on other patients and family for basic care&lt;br&gt;● Bribery / corruption; Assault of elderly patients; Patients abandoned; nurses sleep / drink tea&lt;br&gt;● Accusations of theft; Sexual abuse; Physical abuse; Sex orgy&lt;br&gt;● Absence of compassion; Nurse hostility and rudeness&lt;br&gt;● Lack of caring; Disgraceful conduct&lt;br&gt;● Prejudice against HIV and Aids patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horror stories of patient neglect</td>
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<td>Nurse–patient ratio and patient mortality</td>
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<td>Alleged misconduct</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of professional values</td>
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• “Basic nursing standards and practices in the children’s ward were found to be poor and infection control measures limited” (Baby deaths, 2008:4)
• “… who has described the ordeal he allegedly suffered at the hands of ….Academic Hospital nursing staff as ‘hell on earth’ (Hosken, 2009:1)
• “… before their mother died. …..severely traumatised by what she described as downright rude, obstructive and completely incompetent nurses…” (Masemola, 2009:3)
• “…three women were forced to give birth without assistance at the …Community Health Centre. The women were made to go through all this suffering while nurses laughed, threatened them and continued to drink tea…” (Magome, 2009:6)
• “She was wracked with pain and her water eventually broke. “I(she) went to them again asking for help. They said ‘we don’t want to hear about your water that broke. What we need is the baby’s head. I(she) remained standing there in the doorway from 2am to 6am. My water by then was mixed with blood…I hoped one of them had a good heart and would help me…” (Venter, 2006:2)
• “Five nurses accused of taking part in a sex orgy in front of patients ….. (Mapumulo, 2006:3)
Theme 4: Celebration of a noble profession

Nurses ‘dedicated despite difficulties of their task’

In praise of a healing profession
## Theme 4: Celebration of a noble profession

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Nurses Day</td>
<td>● Celebration of passion, trust, care, dignity and team spirit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Reflection on nursing values</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Service to mankind</td>
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<td>Nurses role in South Africa</td>
<td>● Backbone of PHC</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Professional status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive patient experiences</td>
<td>● Patient reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Devoted nurses hasten healing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Reference to old values and an ethos of service and dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of service excellence</td>
<td>● International recognition – SA nurse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Shining examples of dedication awarded</td>
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Theme 4:
Newspaper illustrations

• “A nurse’s job is often a thankless one, including long hours, meagre salaries, a lack of resources and a huge emotional burden – but many nurses would never trade their work because it is a calling” (Sonjica & Matomela, 2006:3).

• “Nursing has always been a service to mankind in preventing illness, supporting those in need and giving care to others” (Workplace staff, 2005:3).

• “There are thousands of nurses who, despite difficult conditions and poor remuneration dedicate themselves to compassionate service. We salute and honour them. But we mourn the fact that there are so many for whom International Nurses’ Day would have been but a hollow and meaningless tick on the calendar” (In search, 2006:9).
Reflection and Conclusion

Nurses are visible in the print media albeit negative exposure - public image of the profession should be a major concern for us.

Being professional implies having certain attributes, including a scientific knowledge base, specific skills, values and attitudes.

Nursing is a caring profession – but the desired image of a competent, trustworthy and caring profession is often challenged in the South African media in their reporting on poor care, neglect and misconduct.
Recommendations

- Role of the nursing profession and government in addressing issues
- Nursing profession to become visible in positive media coverage
- Role of hospitals and nursing education institutions
- Create awareness of professional values and ethos of the profession among members