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LIFESTYLES

THURSDAY

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Prime-Time

Women:

Still skirting reality

New series says nothing intelligent about nursing

By ABIGAIL TRAFFORD
The Washington Post



They squeal a lot, these cute little hormonettes with shampoo-ad hair, their bouncing bosoms harnessed in push-me-up bras, every muscle aerobically sculpted from tip to toe. The simplicity of it: hair, breasts and legs.

They've even brought back the old Brigitte Bardot baby-doll sex pout — and these girls pout a lot. For them, it's creative thinking, because when they speak their brain-wave patterns scarcely register. Mostly what these creatures do for an hour is sigh, sob, giggle and bounce.

Meet the "Nightingales," the stars of the new NBC series on prime-time television

about a group of nursing students.

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It's not just that Florence Nightingale, that very Victorian founder of modern nursing, would be appalled; she'd probably start her reform movement all over again.

This program is a good illustration of why nursing schools are having trouble attracting able applicants and the country is facing an acute nursing

shortage. Who, after seeing this farce, would want to be a nurse?

There are lots of good reasons for going into nursing, of course, but as the recent government Commission on Nursing found, the American nurse has a terrible image problem. In a television age where life often follows art, the commission concluded that unless the image of nursing is changed in the media, the real problems that undermine the profession — low wages, high-stress working conditions, lack of power and autonomy within the health-care community — will be a lot harder to solve.

Not that you see much of the real world of nursing in the "Nightingales" television soap. The script, which ranges from nubile frolic to psycho violence, involves a handful of bedside bimbos who live in a Victorian Gothic sorority house near the hospital where they are training to be nurses.

There's a lot of dialogue about sex and men and references to "Dr. Buns"; scenes of wet hair, bare legs and wrap-around towels; the usual mix of kooks and coke-heads.

In fact, the professional aspects of nursing and medicine play a very minor role in this program. It might as well be called

"The Aerobics Sisters," since the Nightingales themselves seem to spend more time in a gym than in the hospital.

The star of "Nightingales" is Head Nurse Suzanne Pleshette. With her liquid gravel voice and

her aura of elegance, she is a relief from the little hormonettes. But not much.

The script is terminal, and not even an actress of Pleshette's talent and stature can resuscitate it. She's supposed to present

a good image of nursing — the professional, career-minded nurse who runs a department in a big hospital. But she, too, falls into the bad old stereotype of the sensuous, scheming playmate in search of Dr. Right.

masterful power play, she withholds the doughnuts from the doctors' lounge until she gets a reserved parking space.

Most of her bosom-



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'NIGHTINGALES'

Without any apparent power in the hospital, she uses guile and sex appeal to manipulate the system, which means getting a doctor to do her a favor. Not to put too fine a point on the inanity of it all, but in what is cast as a

'NIGHTINGALES':

**New show has nothing
to do with nursing**

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heaving and poignant pauses between cliches have to do, not with nursing skills in the ICU, but with — you guessed it — Dr. Right, an attractive widower whose wife was her best friend. He's an old male chauvinist, but a good man is hard to find and he's catching on about sensitivity. He admits he's just a jerk, adding that he's so glad she points it out because that's just what his wife used to do. Chances are, if the show lasts a few more weeks, they'll fall into each other's arms.

In keeping with the negative stereotype, even the chief of nursing in "Nightingales" seems destined to fulfill the image of nursing as a get-a-man job rather than a professional career.

One episode ends with a ceremony where the nursing

students get their little caps to show that they're really going to be 20th-century Nightingales. All the hormonettes gather around Pleshette, who pays homage to Founder Flo for bringing nursing out of the Dark Ages. Then she lights a candle that lights the candles of the little Nightingales.

But instead of looking like noble guardians of a proud tradition, they seem more like members of a "Twilight Zone" witches' cult.

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After an hour of "Nightingales" (9 p.m. Wednesdays, Channel 2), it's an understatement to say that nursing has an image problem. Not surprisingly, nurses across the country are up in arms over the program.

After the pilot movie was aired last year, the American Nurses Association re-

ceived hundreds of complaints about the show. As ANA president Lucille A. Joel wrote to Brandon Tartikoff, president of NBC Entertainment: "When a program such as 'The Nightingales' movie presents lax educational standards, questionable motivations to become a nurse, substance abuse and promiscuous behavior as images to portray nurses and nursing education, you can expect that nurses, people who devote their lives to caring for people, will be upset."

The series is a toned-down version of the movie, and there are awkward attempts at dealing with the issues facing nursing today, but these are overwhelmed by the many scenes of hair and legs, bounce and pout.

Still, the series forces nurses to look at what's going on in their ranks, for "Nightingales" reflects some common public perceptions about nursing.

"The image problem is extremely serious," says Carolyn Davis, a registered nurse who was chairman of the national Commission on Nursing. "In media portrayals, the nurse is like a child, a harmless sex kitten."

One result of this poor image is that from 1983 to 1987 there were fewer graduates from nursing schools, as well as a decline in enrollments. In 1988, the number of students entering nursing school rose, according to a survey published in *Nursingworld Journal*, but many schools reduced grade requirements to attract more candidates.

In 1987, Health and Human Services Secretary Otis R. Bowen set up the commission to explore the reasons behind the shortage and recommend ways to boost the supply of nurses. A key recommendation in the commission's final report focuses on image.

"The media has often portrayed nurses in a negative light and given an inaccu-

rate picture of the work they do," concludes the commission. "An immediate and concentrated effort to correct this misperception is called for."

In short, the idea is to transform the perception of the American nurse from hot-pants bubblehead to competent health-care professional.

Armed with an \$800,000 grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia foundation that supports health and social research, American nurses are about to begin their media blitz, from carefully crafted "infomercials" on the new and improved nurse to consciousness-raising scripts about today's high-tech, high-touch Florence Nightingales.

"It's a crusade," says Davis. "What we're saying to nurses is that we really value you."

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How did this happen, you might ask. Here was Florence Nightingale — angel of mercy, courageous heroine,

pure-minded reformer, a woman of class, independence and vision. Sure, she challenged the medical establishment just as nurses are doing today. But never was there a nurse so highly valued in her own time and by future generations.

What is interesting is that the sex-object image is relatively recent. It started in the mid-1960s and flowered in the 1970s. By a quirk of history, just as the women's movement was opening previously closed doors, the nursing profession headed for decline. If women now could be doctors, bankers and lawyers, why would they choose to be nurses?

Paradoxically, while women generally advanced in social status, nurses did not. In fact, they slipped further down the social ladder. Much damage was done to their image when one of the most popular porn movies ever made introduced the world to Nurse Lovelace in

"Deep Throat" in 1972.

Forget about mopping the brow or taking a patient's pulse, or even giving up her job to be the little Mrs. to Dr. Right, the way June Allyson did in the 1953 movie "Battle Circus." Nurse Lovelace had one career goal, and it wasn't CPR or marriage.

"Linda Lovelace was declared a nurse simply on the basis of her abilities to perform fellatio, and she went right to work in the clinic to relieve others of their sexual problems," write Philip A. Kalisch and Beatrice J. Kalisch of the University of Michigan in their provocative study, "The Changing Image of the Nurse."

The image triangle of sex, humor and nurses became entrenched. Between 1966 to 1984, nurses were featured in the titles of X- and R-rated sexploitation films ahead of wives, hookers, cheerleaders and stewardesses. Consider the forgettable lines in "Night Call Nurses," released in 1972: "Why kid

around? Touch therapy doesn't go far enough?" and, "Who says all men are created equal?"

For general audiences, television brought Americans Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan, the nurse in "M*A*S*H," the television series about a field hospital in the Korean War, that ran from 1972 to 1983. Although Hot Lips evolved from an obnoxious, busty, stuck-up, sex-driven head nurse into a good-guy professional member of the medical team, who can forget the movie's scene in the shower or the time she's all wired up in bed with an officer?

Meanwhile, the kinky factor got more perverse and ominous in the media image of nurses in the mid-1970s. Another type of nurse emerged in the public psyche: the Nazi frigid Mommie Dearest S&M virgin vampire. It's Nurse Ratched in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1975); it's

Nurse Diesel in Mel Brooks' "High Anxiety" (1977); it's Nurse Jenny Fields in "The World According to Garp," the 1978 best-seller by John Irving.

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What the national Commission on Nursing is calling for is the return of Florence Nightingale as noble careerist who will help overhaul health care in this country to meet the changing needs of society.

Certainly the stage is set for a revitalized role for nursing. Given the high costs of care, the specialization of doctors and the chronic problems of most diseases, nurses see themselves in a ideal position to provide high-quality care to a wide range of people who aren't sick enough to see a doctor but are still sick enough to require medical attention.

"That's the message we want to get across," says Pamela Miraldo, a Ph.D. nurse who is chief executive officer of the National

League for Nursing. "There's a lot nurses can do — in collaboration with doctors, not in a subservient mode. Then we'd recruit talented men and women."

A good place for nurses to start on their media crusade might be with the scriptwriters for "Nightingales." Put Suzanne Pleshette on the hospital board (it's easier to get a parking space that way), upgrade her education and sense of humor and give her a social life that includes more than playing moral prop to that horny, simpering widower doctor or den mother to those deranged hormonettes.

And instead of all those shampoo scenes and heavy pouting, what about some real nursing action in the coronary-care unit?

Think about it: The next time you're in the hospital and ring for the nurse, who would you like to get? A Bedside Bimbo? A Nazi Vampire? Or Florence Nightingale?