

# Nurses

## Making a Difference

### Bridging the Gap Between Nurses and the Media

*The grassroots Center for Nursing Advocacy.*

**T**he news and entertainment media love to glorify physicians and ignore nurses, says Sandy Summers, co-founder and executive director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy. "Hollywood portrays physicians as the all-knowing, all-doing health care professionals," Summers said in a recent interview. "Physicians regularly receive credit for the work of nurses and other health care professionals." This "Marcus Welby syndrome" is what Summers and her colleagues are determined to combat.



▲ Sandy Summers, her husband Harry, left, and Richard Kimball of the Center for Nursing Advocacy.

It is such portrayals of nurses that prompted Summers and seven colleagues to start the center out of her home in April 2001. Three years later there's still no physical "center" that nurses can visit but, rather, a Web site ([www.nursingadvocacy.org](http://www.nursingadvocacy.org)) that can be used by nurses and journalists alike.

While a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in the late 1990s, Summers grew weary of the inac-

curate depictions of nursing and health care in the media.

"Authors and journalists often use 'medicine' or 'medical' when they mean 'health care' or 'health'—implying that nursing is somehow a subset of medicine," she said. "By using those terms, you totally overlook the contribution of nurses."

What some would consider nitpicking, Summers considers enormously important—especially much of the language surrounding nursing. "Doctors' orders" should be called "medical care plans" or "prescriptions." The word "nursing" is often used to refer to breastfeeding, which Summers believes reinforces the image of nursing as strictly maternal—which in turn makes it difficult to recruit men into the profession.

It was Summers's belief that the nursing shortage was worsening in part because of the poor depiction of nurses in the media.

With the support of faculty and the dean of the nursing school at Johns Hopkins, Summers and some colleagues launched a letter-writing campaign in an attempt to reach the producers of *ER*. A nursing advisor left the show in the late 1990s, and suddenly nurses were even less visible than before. Summers and her friends enlisted the Emergency Nurses Association and were able to schedule a conference call with the coexecutive producer and medical advisor at *ER*.

"We suggested seven different ways of improving nursing's visibility," Summers said, "such as increasing the number of nurse characters. Right now it's one nurse

to 10 physicians on *ER*, which you would never see in a real *ER*."

Summers and her colleagues then decided to begin the Center for Nurse Advocacy. The goal is to create a database of all U.S. nurses and to promote nurses as sources for media interviews.

"For instance," she said, "if a journalist from Omaha wants to do an article on cardiac rehabilitation, we will find a cardiac rehab nurse expert from Omaha in our database who the journalist can use as a resource."

The relationship between nurses and the media is volatile, Summers adds. "And although there are 2.6 million nurses in the United States, they aren't reaching out to journalists. They're not writing letters to editors. As nurses we have a duty to speak out. It's up to us to make our profession attractive."

Perhaps the most important thing the center will do is to function as a clearinghouse, Summers says. "It will be a hub—for getting information, disseminating it, encouraging dialogue, and alerting nurses to misrepresentation in the media."

A newsletter is planned, and the Web site is expanding, thanks to the efforts of the four-person staff and an advisory board of 18 (including *AJN* editor-in-chief Diana J. Mason). "We want to encourage nurses to teach physicians about nursing, to teach them, in medical school, about the role of nurses and about how nurses and physicians can work together," Summers said. "Our center hopes to facilitate this."  
—David Belcher, associate editor



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