



# NO

## to naughty nurse image

RNs speak out against ad campaigns that stereotype nurses to sell everything from vodka to gum. **by Jill Scarrow**



TORONTO EMERGENCY RN LAURIE SPOONER WAS TAKING PUBLIC transit to work in July of 2006 when a five-foot poster hanging on the opposite side of the subway tracks grabbed her attention. Under a slogan that read ‘Water made naughty,’ a young, slender, blonde woman was floating in a pool of water and pulling a long latex glove over her hand as she gazed seductively at transit riders. The most offensive thing about the ad, Spooner says, was the outfit. The long, spiked heels, thigh-high stockings, garter belt and mini skirt weren’t what Spooner or any of her Hospital for Sick Children nursing colleagues would be wearing to work that day, but the message screaming from this woman’s white cap was clear: she was a nurse. The ad ignited the same feelings of anger, disgust and frustration in Spooner that have surfaced every other time she’s seen her profession demeaned in the media.

“When I see images of sexy, naughty nurses, I really believe they contribute to a general misunderstanding of what we do,” she says. Turning nurses into sex objects is offensive enough, she adds, but that’s not the worst part. “Over the years it has become clearer and clearer that the shortages and the lack of funding – not just for staffing, but for education and research – it’s all a result of no one having a clear picture of what nurses are doing.”

Enraged, Spooner wrote to Vincor International, the company behind the ad, and to the Toronto Transit Commission to complain that not only was it offensive, but it did little to reflect nursing as a

Illustration: Maurice Vellekoop

life-saving profession. She also contacted RNAO, which partnered with the Baltimore-based Center for Nursing Advocacy – an organization that worked to improve nurses’ media image – to solicit apologies and promises from the American-owned beverage maker to withdraw the campaign by month’s end.

Spooner is just one of thousands of RNAO members who have spoken out against advertising campaigns that depict nurses as sex objects. The year before her angry letter to Vincer, hundreds of Spooner’s equally outraged colleagues confronted Virgin Mobile after company owner Richard Branson launched a new cellphone plan by leaping from buildings to rescue women dressed as nurses who were chained to cars at a busy downtown Toronto intersection. More recently, members vocally objected to a Dentyne gum commercial that showed a young nurse crawling into bed with a patient, and to an online Neilson Dairy ad that dressed women up as ‘nurses’ in short skirts and caps and invited consumers to come and meet the models at promotional events.

RN Sandy Summers is the former executive director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy and now leads The Truth About Nursing, an organization that promotes positive images of the profession. She is also co-author of *Saving lives: why the media’s portrayal of nursing puts us all at risk*, released in February 2009. Summers has lobbied extensively to protect nursing’s image in the U.S., and has helped RNAO in its actions against advertisers. She says marketers aren’t the only ones guilty of running the profession through the mud. Hollywood writers, directors and producers do it too. In her role, she has lobbied against shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* and *ER* for their portrayal of nurses as either love interests, or simply non-existent. Physician characters play doctor, nurse, social worker and physiotherapist all at once, she says. But thanks, in part, to the Center’s work with writers on *ER*, the image of nurses on that show has started to improve. Writers recently introduced a character studying to be a nurse anaesthetist. But, prior to that, Summers says, the only way *ER* nurses could prove how smart they were was by applying to medical school.

Summers believes other professions may not grapple with the same kind of negative media persona because of the implicit respect society bestows on them. Lawyers, for example, don’t score highly in polls about



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public trust, but the amount of money they can earn and the perceived rigours of law school send the message that it’s a career for smart, talented people. Physicians are also a group that seem to garner that same level of respect, although Summers says that’s come with a little gentle nudging of television producers and writers by the American Medical Association (AMA). In the 1950s and 60s, AMA was vocal about the need to portray doctors as respectable professionals on TV. And because of strict ideas about gender roles more than five decades ago, nurses were once leading ladies in medical dramas. But since it’s now acceptable for women to be physicians – in reality and fiction – leading female characters are now doctors, and nursing is often just left out altogether.

In Summers’ view, every nurse should speak out against the often offensive and inaccurate portrayal of the profession on television – and during commercial breaks – because unless nurses get respect in popular culture, the public won’t get a sense of how important the profession really is. She also believes that in the U.S., that lack of awareness about the role has led to political deci-

sion making that leaves fewer nurses working at the bedside, or available to care for families in communities.

“Until we get the world to see nursing as a valuable career in which smart men and women save lives and improve patient outcomes, we’re never going to get the funding we need to resolve the global nursing shortage,” Summers says. “I really think the most important public health crisis facing the world is the global nursing shortage.”

Battling back against today’s unsavoury nursing stereotypes requires a closer look at some centuries-old ideas about nursing, according to Sioban Nelson, Dean of the Lawrence S. Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing at the University of Toronto. Nelson has written extensively about the profession’s history and traces the image of the naughty nurse as far back as the nursing nuns of 17th century Europe. Their work took them beyond the boundaries of contemporary, polite society and into close contact not only with disease and death, but also with men. Nurses protected themselves from the perceived shame by taking religious vows, wearing veils and habits, and cloaking themselves in the notion that they were following a calling from God.

When Florence Nightingale brought nursing into the secular world, she understood that if it was going to be respectable, it had to be desexualized. She weaved religious imagery into the profession by clothing her nurses in conservative dress, ensuring each read the Bible and prayed. Still, Nelson says that illicit association between nurses and male bodies means that, in cultural memory, nursing sits in a balance between “nun and whore.” And getting beyond 400-year-old ideas doesn’t happen quickly. Even in the 21st century, Nelson says, the notion of equality between the sexes may be foreign to many people’s grandmothers.

“It’s actually only in the 20th century that women have had agency in the world, that they can go on public transport by themselves, go to work, and be colleagues with men,” Nelson says. “These things seem obvious because they’re a couple of generations old, but stigmas last a lot longer than generations. They’re imprinted on our culture.”

Still, journalist and author Suzanne Gordon says that doesn’t mean nurses should just accept the damage these ideas can do.

Gordon has written eight books on nursing, and this February led a seminar at RNAO to encourage members to talk

about their knowledge and work, and why it makes a difference to patient care. She believes if more nurses tell patients why they're taking certain medications, or why rehab exercises they're doing will help them recover, people will get the message nurses aren't just nice, they're smart.

"I really don't think the public needs to have one more person tell them nurses are caring. People know that. They need to have people tell them nurses are smart," she says.

Ashwin Joshi, Director of the MBA program at York University's Schulich School of Business, agrees that the profession should stand up and object to the way RNs are tarted-up in advertisements. He says these stereotypes may be acceptable today in much the same way that it was once considered acceptable to depict Asians with exaggerated, stereotypical accents or African Americans as poor criminals. Thanks to vocal opposition, those images now cause viewers to cringe.

"There's a bottom-up resistance to it, which is nurses' organizations saying 'cut the crap,' but there also needs to be a change in the cultural climate as a whole."

Joshi says companies often use sex, fear, or humour to convey the message they want consumers to remember about their products. Sex does sell, but it can also backfire. In September 2007, the makers of Dentyne Ice gum launched a television commercial featuring a young male hospital patient putting a piece of gum into his mouth before pressing the call bell. Unable to resist his fresh breath, his attractive female nurse slides onto his bed and leans in for a kiss before drawing the privacy curtain. Obviously hoping for similar treatment, the older man in the next bed grabs the gum. An older, grey-haired nurse appears with a flirtatious grin, causing a look of exasperation to flit across the man's face. Joshi says Dentyne's commercial is attempting to appeal to teenaged males, but it may not have been edgy enough to tap into this savvy demographic. Young consumers know chewing gum won't guarantee successful love lives.

In response to the campaign, RNAO filed a complaint against Cadbury Adams (the makers of Dentyne) with Advertising Standards Canada, the marketing industry's self-regulating body. Thanks to email complaints from more than 1,300 RNAO mem-

## Image is everything

*RNAO executive and general members are vocal about why advertisers need to stop using naughty nurse images in their campaigns...*

### August 2004

**Skechers shoes uses images of singer Christina Aguilera dressed as a 'naughty nurse' to promote its products. Then RNAO President Joan Lesmond writes a letter to the company...**

*"By promoting nurses as sex objects, Skechers not only performed a disservice to the profession, but also to the general public who need and deserve high-quality nursing care ... RNAO has actively promoted nursing as a challenging career choice ... our efforts to promote nursing and debunk the sexist, negative stereotypes perpetuated by ill-conceived ad campaigns are of the utmost importance if we are to stem the coming shortage."*

*"I have helped new moms learn to care for their babies. I have cared for people after life-altering illness and surgery. I have comforted patients who are dying, and cared for their bodies after they die. If you question our professionalism, I challenge you to spend a day in any of our well-worn shoes."*

Leslie Inglis, RN, Kingston

### August 2005

**Motts Clamato launches a campaign in which a woman dressed as a 'nurse' rings the doorbell of a young man who, presumably, invites her in for some sexual activity...**

*"I am so tired of this kind of thing. I think we're doing our job to get the message across, but others just don't get it ... your portrayal of nurses serves only to perpetrate an insulting image of a dedicated professional group."*

Elizabeth Edwards, RN, Belleville



### September 2007

**RNAO launches a campaign against Dentyne Ice gum for a commercial featuring nurses climbing into bed with patients...**

*"There is nothing 'sexy' about this career. It is a combination of knowledge, clinical judgment, and skill. To continue being portrayed as sexually available to patients increases the potential for assault on the job. And yes, we do get assaulted and sometimes have to deal with inappropriate patients because of this ongoing fight to inform people of exactly what it is we do for a living."*

Lorraine Dunn, RN, Toronto

### March 2005

**Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Mobile, launches the company's cellphone service in Canada by sliding down a cable from the top of a building at a busy Toronto intersection and rescuing three 'nurses' chained to cars. Hundreds of RNAO members express their outrage...**

bers, Cadbury pulled the ad off the air in October of that same year.

Jennifer Bennett, a public health nurse in Guelph, says that when she heard Cadbury canned the commercial, she felt empowered. Bennett was one of the thousands who responded to RNAO's action alert. It gave her a way to react to a 30-second commercial that made her angry for weeks she says. It also reminded her of some of the negative experiences she's had in her career. "Working in a hospital, I have had to cope with harassment and inappropriate behaviour," she wrote. "(I) find it disgusting that you would advertise your product in this manner."

Bennett was also angry because the ad sent the message that nurses enjoy being seduced by patients. A mother of two young boys, she worried that she would one day have to reassure them she doesn't get into bed with strange men at work.

For Emmet O'Reilly, a primary care nurse in Toronto, portraying nurses as young, sexy women leads to a larger challenge for the profession: convincing more men to join.

"These sexualized stereotypes are just

going to continue to perpetuate that it's a woman's only role," he says, adding that's too bad, because it should be just as acceptable and normal for a man to be a nurse as it is for a woman to be a physician.

Last summer, O'Reilly responded to a troubling ad campaign for flavoured milk products produced by Neilson Dairy. The online promotion bothered him because it attempted to associate a healthy lifestyle with an ill portrayal of his profession. Naughty nurse-themed images – complete with short skirts and high heels – appeared on the company's website, which encouraged people to come out and meet the 'nurses' touring summer hot spots like Muskoka.

In July, RNAO called on Neilson to remove the ads. The company apologized for any offence taken, but defended the campaign as a humorous, healthy and wholesome pitch to a hard-to-reach youthful demographic. An action alert was distributed among members, asking them to appeal directly to Neilson in emails. On Aug. 8 – after receiving 1,000 messages from RNs like O'Reilly – the company with-

drew the images from its website, promised to stop using them at public events, and committed to not using nurses in future ads.

Paula Dawson, care coordinator at a mental health outpatient clinic for adults and adolescents at St. Joseph's Healthcare in Hamilton, says it was satisfying to be one of the nurses who got Neilson's attention. She wasn't just offended by the campaign images; Neilson's response also bothered her. Dawson works with teenagers and says she's not sure the sexy-nurse campaigns really influence what they buy. "My work is in an Early Intervention Program for Psychosis... I am highly aware that it is important to relate to youth on terms that have meaning to them," Dawson wrote to the milk company. But she worries that such campaigns can be detrimental to the relationship she and her staff rely on having with their patients. She says young people need to trust health-care providers enough to talk about the symptoms of their illnesses, or any side effects from the drugs they might be taking.

While Dawson is confident her patients can differentiate between the smart health-care providers in their real lives and the racy pictures in the media, she hopes the rest of the public can too. Belonging to RNAO, she says, is a good first step toward making sure everyone gets the message that nurses aren't sex objects. Through action alerts and other lobbying activities, RNs can collectively talk about how rich and diverse the profession actually is. "If ads are offensive and we don't say so, advertisers won't change their behaviour," she says.

Spooner couldn't agree more. She still emails corporations that tamper with nursing's image, and she doesn't shy away from writing letters to the editor in response to news articles that glorify how caring nurses are, but omit that they're also smart and knowledgeable. Spooner wants to make sure everyone understands what the profession can offer, especially potential recruits.

"If you're a 16-year-old ... you might want to do something exciting that is going to challenge you, let you travel, go on to get a PhD or do research," she says. "All of that is nursing, but people don't know that ... if we speak out one little bit at a time, we can slowly increase knowledge of what we do. That will increase the respect we get, and that's going to improve our numbers and make us a better profession." **RN**

## Image is everything



### July 2008

**Neilson Dairy promotes a new flavoured milk drink by featuring 'naughty nurses' in online ads and at public events. More than 1,000 members write letters to the company...**

*"Would you depict women doctors in this way? If not, why not? ... Would your daughter or the other young women you are targeting apply to university to study nursing if that is the image of nursing as depicted by your company?"*

**Anne Marie Webster, RN, Waterloo**

### October 2008

**RNAO urges members to say 'No Deal' when the popular television game show *Deal or No Deal* dresses its models up in naughty nurse outfits because a contestant is a nurse.**

*"Spend an hour in a trauma unit beside a real nurse... spend an hour in a burn unit... side-by-side with a real nurse... comfort and care for a dying child... provide dignity to an incontinent elder... talk to your viewing audience about what you have seen... We will not be in short skirts. We will not be in revealing tops. We may be in scrubs stained with blood. We may be taking a quiet moment to clear our heads of the sounds a patient makes when they must endure a painful burn dressing. We may be holding the hand of a mother who is losing her child in the trauma room. We are amazing, intelligent, compassionate women and men. Your choice to portray us as anything less is a discredit to our work and to your show."*

**Sue Chapman, RN, Palgrave**

JILL SCARROW IS STAFF WRITER AT RNAO.