



# Is image important?

Angel, battleaxe, handmaiden and sex kitten. **Lisa Berry** has analysed nurses' press coverage to discover the images that dominate the media

**H**OW NURSES and nursing are viewed by the public has changed over the years. In the 1940s, nursing was highly regarded – albeit low paid – and nurses were portrayed as professionals, selflessly committed to their vocation. By the early 1950s the emerging NHS had shifted the focus from commitment to the profession towards commitment to the nation. Nursing was increasingly placed in the service of medicine.

Then in the 1960s, coupled with the development of medical television dramas, *Carry on* films and the growth in doctor/nurse romantic fiction, 'doctor's handmaiden', 'battleaxe', and 'sex kitten' were added to the stereotypes. By the end of the decade these popular images were being contradicted in newspapers and news bulletins by images of nurses' anger, frustration and dissent, resulting in the strikes of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since the 1990s nursing's image has been seen in the context of the NHS in crisis, centred on funding, waiting lists, hospital closures, staff and bed shortages.

The question for nursing is: 'Do these images matter?' After all, many of these stereotypes are fictional and therefore bear no relation to what nurses actually do and achieve.

Well, fictional or not, there is much evidence that we are all influenced by the media. A profession's media image can be a measure of its

political, social and economic value. Negative press coverage can undermine nurses' morale. Media images of nursing may also influence government and policy makers in allocating resources. As the users of health care provided by nurses, patients' opinions are open to influence.

Given that more than 13 million national newspapers are sold daily and that a MORI poll conducted for *The Times* in January 2002 found that 66 per cent of 1,955 people interviewed felt the condition of the NHS was one of the most important issues facing Britain, *Nursing Standard* analysed that year's British press reports on nursing and nurses to see how they were portrayed.

### Low pay and staff shortages

Unsurprisingly, the focus was on low pay, staff shortages and poor working conditions. Nurses' strike threats received coverage in April with reports in the broadsheets and middle-market tabloids that their goodwill could not be taken for granted by the government.

'People say we shouldn't strike as we would lose public sympathy. Well, public sympathy doesn't pay the bills,' one nurse told *The Times*. This sentiment was reflected in the headline: 'Burdened nurses ready for pay fight.'

That same month, Beverly Malone, general secretary of the RCN, addressed congress. *The Daily Express* reported her telling delegates that £3 billion needed to be invested in the profession by 2008: 'I am not convinced the 3.6 per cent increase in your April pay packet is going to make nurses feel appreciated and I haven't met any nurses who have been convinced either.' The article argued that this warning would alarm the

government. It had set a target of recruiting 35,000 new nurses, midwives and health visitors by 2008, but had also refused to award above-inflation pay increases to help meet this pledge. The article said a 'recruitment crisis' had been caused by 'low pay coupled with long, unsociable hours in under-funded and under-staffed hospitals, where violence from patients is a growing problem'. A strapline read: 'Hospital staff on the breadline' and one nurse described how, after 23 years' nursing, she and her family still relied on state benefits to supplement her pay. Another article in the *Daily Express* revealed how a 'dedicated' nurse committed suicide because of debt.

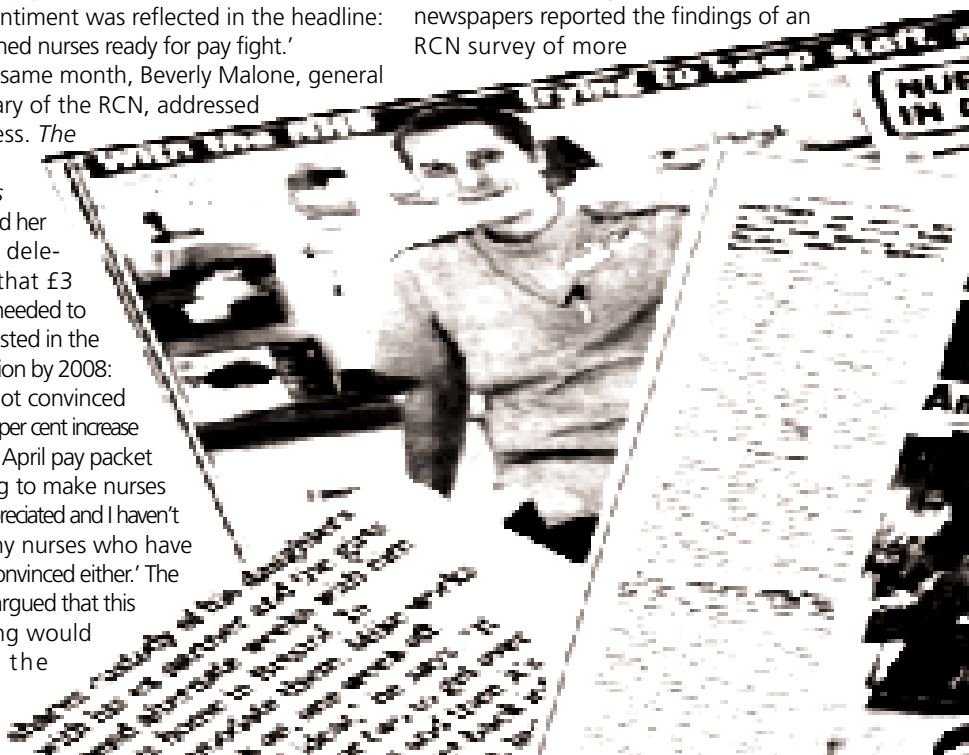
Dr Malone's speech set the stage for a showdown at congress with Alan Milburn, then health secretary. Chair Maura Buchanan demanded he explain why police earn more than nurses. She received a standing ovation from delegates while an angry Mr Milburn declined to answer. The press delighted with headlines such as 'Milburn mauled by nurses over low pay' and 'Nurses ambush Milburn over pay'.

But the image of the all-new politically aware nurse was not straightforward. In November, newspapers reported the findings of an RCN survey of more

## Nursing the Future



**Nursing the Future is our year-long campaign to enhance the image and reputation of nursing and midwifery in the UK. With the help of our readers, we aim to rebrand the image of nurses and midwives for the 21st century. We will encourage readers to publicise what they do and celebrate all that is dynamic, complex and challenging about the professions. We will profile excellence and highlight some of the daily success stories of modern day nursing and midwifery. We aim to make 2004 a year for nursing and midwifery. Join us in nursing the future...**



than 5,000 nurses that found one in three nurses had taken an extra job to make ends meet but also that three out of five nurses were satisfied with their jobs and happy with the care they provided, despite low wages. The overall message was that nurses gained inherent satisfaction in caring for others and this still took precedence over pay.

The focus on pay in April sparked a chain reaction, with many reports describing high housing costs, low morale, nurses retiring, leaving the profession or Britain to work abroad, resulting in severe staff shortages, poor patient care, and an increase in the use of expensive agency staff and foreign nurses – who were themselves subject to discrimination and exploitation.

However, coverage of nurses and nursing was not all about pay. Nursing stereotypes were challenged in articles featuring nurses taking on roles previously held by doctors. In an article in the *Daily Express*, a nurse consultant in urology – dubbed ‘supernurse’ – is described as leaving the ‘bedpan image behind for a new high-tech, high-profile role’, performing a skilled procedure that previously could only be undertaken by a surgeon. We are told that nurse consultants also diagnose illness, treat patients and see GP referrals. They complete six months’ training and are reassessed every three years to ensure they are practising safely. Nursing degrees are preferred. These nurses are a world apart from doctors’ handmaidens.

But the language and imagery of the stereotype are still present: ‘Just six months ago Tarnya was more used to handling bedpans

than medical instruments.’ They are used to show how the role is different: ‘Tarnya carries out a cystoscopy with an ease and swiftness worthy of a highly-skilled surgeon.’ All the more surprising given that she is a ‘petite, 5ft 1in nurse’. If a male surgeon, or nurse, were being described, it is less likely that physical appearance would feature. And the ‘angel’ is still present, even in this expanded role: ‘She insists that, like all nurses, her motivation is a love of the job rather than money.’ However, despite this, the role is a progression: ‘At last we are being recognised for our skills and ability to shoulder more responsibility.’

In February 2002 there was a revolutionary shift in GPs’ attitudes to nurses with a British Medical Association (BMA) report arguing that patients attending surgeries should be seen first by a nurse who would recommend which health professional they consult. This was a fundamental change as the BMA had opposed all previous attempts to end the GPs’ ‘gatekeeper’ role.

#### Doctors and nurses

A BMA spokesperson told *The Independent*: ‘This is a document we would not have issued ten years ago. Things are changing.’ Yet the article was still couched in language that devalued nurses’ clinical skills: ‘Trivial complaints could be dealt with by the nurse, leaving the more serious cases for the GP.’ In the same month the news that 10,000 nurses were to be trained to prescribe from an extended range of medicines, without having first to consult a doctor, saw another expansion of their responsibilities.

Nurses and GPs were also seen working in partnership with the formation of primary care trusts (PCTs) in April. PCTs were immediately responsible for 50 per cent of NHS spending

#### Campaign aims



- To enhance the image and reputation of nursing and midwifery.
- To challenge and dispel misconceptions about nursing and midwifery.
- To empower nurses and midwives to publicise what they do.
- To encourage nurses and midwives to ‘sell’ or talk up their professions to future generations.
- To raise the public voice and profile of nurses and midwives.
- To encourage more respect for the professions.

for 2002-03, rising to 75 per cent by 2004. *The Independent* reported that ministers believed ‘GPs and nurses will deliver a service that is more humane, caring and convenient than the consultant-led, hi-tech hospitals that dominated the medical landscape of the past century’. This was one of the few stories highlighting nursing outside hospitals.

Matrons returned to the wards in 2002 after a 35-year absence. The battleaxe stereotype is used to show how the modern matron is different: ‘Forget the starchy Hattie Jacques image so lodged in the public’s perception of bygone matrons. Today’s matrons bear little resemblance to the formidable dragons who ruled over young nurses,’ claimed *The Telegraph*. Instead they will focus on patients’ concerns, offer support to staff and have greater influence over ward budgets. A photo of the traditional female matron in a starched cap and blue uniform is contrasted with a line-up of smiling modern matrons in easy on the eye pastel grey tunics and trousers (which can also be worn by male matrons), captioned ‘a softer image and attitude’.

Encouragingly, just one article portrayed the sex kitten and was based on a television documentary, indicating that the stereotype may still be alive and kicking in this medium.

Under the headline ‘Naughty but nurse’, the article in *The Sun* described how in *Confessions of Doctors and Nurses*, ‘angels’ reveal the ‘saucy truth about their amazing Carry On-style antics in Britain’s hospitals’. Nurses’ uniforms are ‘still a major turn-on’ and one ‘sexy blonde’ nurse uses hers to make sure she never has to buy a drink in the pub. This is the stuff of seaside postcards. ▶





But some of the 'antics' are much more serious: 'One young guy... kept pinching all the nurses' bottoms. So we decided to get back at him. We said he had to have a catheter on doctor's orders. He looked really worried and said there was nothing wrong with him "down there". We were supposed to use a local anaesthetic but we didn't. He was in agony, bless him. Then we tied the catheter to the bed so he couldn't move.' The image of nurses presented here is demeaning and potentially damaging for nursing.

The four main stereotypes have a common characteristic: all are female. Although 10 per cent of nurses are male, they are rarely portrayed in the media. Just two reports portrayed male nurses – and one of them was leaving nursing because of staff shortages. Although the first story in the *Daily Express* did not pander to the stereotype that male nurses are effeminate or gay because they have adopted the 'female' characteristics of care, the angel stereotype was used instead: 'He derives enormous satisfaction from his work and the people he works with are appreciative. He doesn't even consider himself to be badly paid... He offers information, counselling and comfort.'

The stress of juggling family commitments with shiftwork was highlighted in the second article about a male nurse, also in the *Daily Express*. Single parent and A&E nurse Mike Peters described how he worked night shifts so that he could care for his daughters and fulfil his work duties. Despite this, the inherent satisfaction in nursing still took precedence over pay and working conditions for Mike: 'I could easily get a job with NHS Direct which is two grades higher, with fixed hours,



**Picture this: cleaning up with a second job (top left), a rare portrayal of a male nurse, Mike Peters, and a line-up of the new breed of smiling modern matrons**

£1,600 a year more pay and less stress. But it wouldn't suit me. I love working in A&E. I am challenged every day.' He had 'abandoned' his career plans but said: 'At least I'm happy in a job where people are always pleased to see you.'

A number of articles that year also reported that patients were happy to be seen by nurses and satisfied with their care. In February, journalists reported the findings of a MORI poll

commissioned by the BMA that found 87 per cent of people said they would be happy to be seen by a nurse rather than a doctor 'if their condition was not serious'. In April it was reported that patients were more satisfied with the treatment they had from nurse practitioners (NPs) than from GPs. NPs spent more time with patients, did more investigations, kept better records and communicated better than doctors. The researchers told *The Times*: 'Our review lends support to an increased involvement of NPs in primary care.'

There was more positive coverage in April that year when an RCN survey found that of 1,000 people surveyed, 86 per cent were very satisfied or quite satisfied with the care and advice they had received from a nurse in the past year. Almost two thirds of younger people rated highly the ability to see a nurse with specialist knowledge of their condition. But half those surveyed questioned whether nurses were good listeners.

Overall, press coverage for 2002 portrayed nursing in the context of a crisis-ridden NHS. Reports about low pay, staff shortages and poor working conditions positioned nursing as a job not a career. As such, its political, social and economic value may be seen as low. Yet nurses were portrayed as dedicated, underpaid and overworked individuals who 'by their nature' value caring for others more than they do complaining about their lot. Therefore, it falls to the press to campaign on their behalf using the angel stereotype. While this may seem to be a 'positive' image of nurses, a way of showing gratitude for their work, it can also be viewed as paternalistic. It values nurses as individuals, but devalues nursing and lowers its status ■

Paul Stuart/South West News Service/Caters News Agency

## What makes you proud to be a nurse? Join *Nursing Standard's* campaign

If you feel inspired to share your stories, contact the *Nursing Standard* team and tell them what you love about your job, what challenges you face, what inspires you to keep going and how you are educating people about the job you do

Your name: .....

What inspired you to come to work today? .....

Your address: .....

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What was the last good thing a patient said to you? .....

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Your tel no: .....

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Your email address: .....

What makes a good ambassador for nursing? .....

Your job and where you work: .....

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What did you do today that made a difference? .....

Can we contact you? Yes  No

Please answer the questions opposite using additional sheets if necessary

Write to: Nursing the Future, *Nursing Standard*, The Heights, 59-65 Lowlands Road, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex HA1 3AE

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