

SANDY SUMMERS, RN, MSN, MPH  
HARRY JACOBS SUMMERS



# SAVING LIVES



WHY THE MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF NURSING  
PUTS US ALL AT RISK

UPDATED SECOND EDITION

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For our children Cole and Simone  
And their future nurses



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There comes a time when you swim or sink  
So I jumped in the drink  
Cause I couldn't make myself clear  
Maybe I wrote in invisible ink  
Oh I've tried to think  
How I could've made it appear.

But another illustration is wasted  
'Cause the results are the same  
I feel like a ghost  
Who's trying to move your hands  
Over some Ouija board  
In the hopes I can spell out my name.

What some take for magic at first glance  
Is just sleight of hand  
Depending on what you believe  
Something gets lost when you translate  
It's hard to keep straight  
Perspective is everything.

Aimee Mann and Clayton Scoble  
from "Invisible Ink"  
Aimee Mann, *Lost in Space* (2002)





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## FOREWORD

Some years ago, I was invited to be a guest on a national talk show to discuss a popular television drama I'll call *Hospital*. Also on the panel of guests were the actors who played physicians on the drama, a physician who wrote for the show, and two other physicians. The producers of the talk show suggested that if I'd never seen the series (I had not) I should watch a couple of episodes before coming to Los Angeles.

I complied, watched several episodes, and was disappointed not to be surprised by the way they'd chosen to depict nursing. In the episodes, nurses were a nebulous, silent presence in the background. They never actually did anything other than stand around watching the doctors, who were busy single-handedly saving lives.

These Hollywood superdocs did it all—including the nursing duties that I, in my short twenty-year nursing career, never witnessed any physician perform. The only featured nurse role was the most dysfunctional character of all. Portrayed as a brooding, damaged nurse, she was tortured not by overwhelming responsibilities to the patients or by understaffing or burnout, but rather by having to decide which physician to sleep with next.

As with most Hollywood-generated medical shows, I found myself asking the same question I've been asking since my first Dr. Kildare episode: Where are the real nurses?

According to the Gallup polls, nurses are the most trusted professionals. Still, that has not changed Hollywood's hackneyed, one-dimensional portrayals of nurses as sex objects, handmaidens, psychopaths, and worse. In fact, the entertainment industry has done very little to present nurses in a positive light.

Consider my experience on the talk show. After arriving at the Los Angeles studio, I was taken to a small room obviously intended for storage of extra equipment and maintenance supplies, and I was told to wait there until someone came to get me. Thinking I had been mistaken as an applicant for a janitorial position, I explained that I was actually a guest on the show and

asked to be taken to the Green Room. I was told the Green Room was not available and left to stare at the walls.

After two hours of staring at brooms and discarded stage lights, I wandered to the floor below. There I found the Green Room where a party for the show's other guests was in full progress. When asked who I was, I replied that I was the nurse author who had been asked to be a guest on the show.

Apparently that answer didn't cut it because I was told that the event in the Green Room was a private party for the show's other guests, and I would have to return to my special waiting area upstairs, or, as I had named it, the "nurses only" closet.

When taping began, I was seated next to *Hospital's* scriptwriting emergency room (ER) physician. The show was taped in front of a live audience, and what should have been a two-hour taping session turned into a seven-hour fiasco. Taping was stop and go, and the retaping had tempers and egos running high.

During one of the numerous breaks, an audience member fell from the bleachers, having a full-blown seizure. I'd unhooked my microphone and was on my way to see what could be done when I realized the scriptwriting ER physician had not moved. Over my shoulder I said, "Come on doc. Man down. Let's go."

He looked at me as if I were insane and replied, "No way. You're the nurse—you take care of it."

So, being an ER nurse, I did.

The show host, dumbstruck that none of the physicians present had offered their assistance, asked me off-camera what the hell that was all about. In a few words I explained that in the real world, it was the nurses who provide most of the care to the patients—a fact that was never brought up during the taping.

After I returned to my place on the stage, I asked the writer/physician if there were any nurses on the show's writing staff.

He answered—and I quote here—"Why in God's name would we ever consider such a thing as that?"

I counted to ten and replied: "Because, as an ER physician you know full well that it is the nurses who run the ER. The nurses triage, make the initial decisions, do most of the work, provide emotional support to both the patient and the family, and at times save the doctor's butt. That's why."

I tried to reason with him that the writers needed to make the nurses' roles more realistic, or the show could not be seen as an accurate portrayal of a real hospital setting.

Of course nothing I said made a dent (me being just a nurse and all), and Hollywood in general is still reluctant to change its attitudes about nurses.

Recently, a producer for a popular hospital reality show asked me to write a script for an episode. I was pretty excited about the prospect until he added that the script had to showcase a heroic ER physician. I told him that if I did agree to write a script, it would have to showcase a heroic ER nurse, since in my personal experience, nurses were the heroes.

Faced with that novel idea, he assured me that viewers were only interested in stories about doctors, not nurses. I finally directed him to the previously-mentioned scriptwriting ER physician who I was sure could give him exactly what he wanted.

It seems that the entertainment industry cannot, or will not, accept nurses as the autonomous, highly-educated health professionals they are. Thus, the subtle demeaning of the nursing profession continues. Unless they already have learned by firsthand experience, the public needs to be shown a true portrayal of the nurse as a professional rich in compassion, skill, and knowledge. This is a rare combination of traits to possess and maintain, especially when considering that nurses work in environments that most people would liken to war zones.

*Saving Lives* takes a hard look at what is wrong with the way Hollywood and other media have gone about undermining the nursing profession. The chapters in this book instill an awareness that will forever change the way people view nurses in the media.

But take warning: you may be left with a strong desire to change the system. Luckily, the authors tell you how.

Echo Heron, RN, author of *Intensive Care: The Story of a Nurse*, *Tending Lives: Nurses on the Medical Front*, and the Adele Monsarrat medical mystery series



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Finally, we thank everyone who has helped us tell the public what nurses really do.



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## INTRODUCTION

Nurses save lives every day. But the media usually ignores their vital role in health care. That contributes to a lack of respect and resources for the profession, putting many lives at risk.

In 2005 US Army Sergeant Tony Wood was riding in a Humvee in Iraq. A roadside bomb exploded. Metal tore into Wood's internal organs. A month later he woke up at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. Wood's story appeared in an August 2008 *New York Times* article by Lizette Alvarez about traumatic brain injuries in combat veterans.<sup>1</sup> Once Wood arrived at a hospital, expert nurses led the 24/7 effort that helped him survive, as they do with any patient whose injuries are so severe. But here is how Alvarez summed up that effort: "Doctors patched up most of his physical wounds over five months."

In a similar incident, a roadside bomb blew up near a Humvee in which US Army Sergeant Nick Paupore was riding in Kirkuk City. Paupore lost his leg and an enormous amount of blood, but he too survived. In March 2008 the CNN website posted a story by Sandra Young about a Walter Reed neurologist's use of a promising new mirror therapy to help amputees like Paupore cope with phantom limb pain.<sup>2</sup> Once again, nurses no doubt provided the great majority of the care that helped Paupore live. But in describing the care Paupore received in Germany on his way to Walter Reed, the article reported simply that "doctors fought to save his life."

Of course, sometimes the media is merely repeating without question what it hears from those with influence. In November 2013 remarks reported around the world, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius called for intervention in the Central African Republic because that nation was in "complete chaos" and "on the verge of genocide." What was most worrisome, specifically? "You have seven surgeons for a population of five million, an infant mortality rate of 25 percent in some areas and 1.5 million people who have nothing, not even food, and armed gangs, bandits, etc."<sup>3</sup> It sure sounded like *surgeons*



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