

It's Happened: The World is Listening to Nurses

Janet Perrella D'Alesandro

It took a pandemic, but your voice is finally being heard.

This is well-deserved recognition for nurses that's taken a long time coming. I know because I've been AACN's media relations director for more than 20 years. On one side, I see what you do every day and I know everything they are saying about you across the globe is true. You have extreme smarts and laser-focused critical thinking. You perform daily acts of courage and kindness. You drive a freight train for better patient care that never stops or slows down.

I also know you've moved to the highest levels of management, sparked innovations at all levels of practice, and changed lives in your countries and communities. But then there's the other side; although I tried my hardest, I could rarely get the mainstream media to cover your stories – and getting them to understand what nurses do was even harder. But all that's changed.

COVID Came Calling and So Did Reporters

Before the pandemic, I regularly used these stats to convey the depth of nurses' invisibility in the media: Nurses are quoted only two percent of the time in mainstream health news stories. When they are, they're rarely identified as nurses. Most of the time when nurses are featured, they're lionized for their care, compassion, trustworthiness, and nurturing acts, not their skills and brains. Given that nurses are the single largest group of health care professionals, and the fifth largest occupation in the United States according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), that invisibility is pretty shocking. Please note that these are figures for lay media. Members of the nursing media contact AACN's newsroom all the time. Many of the writ-



ers are nurses themselves. They get it, and that's a beautiful thing. But getting mainstream media to appreciate what you do has been a much harder sell, at least until now.

The good news is, the pandemic is shining the spotlight on what you've been doing in your practice all along. But here's the thing: It's great to see you appreciated, however your job is not yet done. For example, I observed many news segments on top TV stations for May 6, National Nurses Day, as well as coverage in major newspapers. I saw much about nurses' courage and acts of compassion. What I really would have liked to see more of, however, was a focus on your knowledge, training, and skills, as well as your acts of leadership, opinions on the massive changes you know need to happen in the U.S. health care system, and the impact you've been having on laws and policy.

Now that you have mics pointed in your direction or reporters calling to fea-

ture you, your job is to help the public understand the other aspects of nursing that rarely get mentioned: Your research acumen, your role as educator, your management and leadership skills, your decisions in the boardroom, and your vision for a much better, safer, health care future for all. This is crucial because I don't think America has absorbed that yet.

You do have another force in your favor: the annual Gallup Poll has told us for 18 years in a row that the American public trusts nurses more than any other profession. My guess is, that trust has gone through the roof in 2020, so, during this extraordinary time in history, you have an excellent opportunity to educate the public. The nursing profession will reap the benefits, but so will your fellow Americans.

You've Got Our Help in Spreading the Word

In December 2019, I attended a Media and Nursing Summit in



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Washington, DC, with AAACN President Kristene Grayem and President-Elect Anne Jessie. The Summit was hosted by the Center for Health Policy and Media Engagement, George Washington University School of Nursing. It was co-sponsored by the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International, and the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Nursing. We were joined by the leaders of other major nursing organizations, researchers, and communications professionals.

Diana Mason, PhD, RN, FAAN, principal investigator of *The Woodhull Study Revisited* (The Woodhull Study is the seminal research project on nurse invisibility in the media) and a senior policy service professor for the Center for Health Policy at George Washington University; and Barbara Glickstein, MPH, MS, RN, co-investigator of the *Woodhull Study Revisited* and Director of Communication at the Center, led the discussions.

We learned from 1997-2017 there was no change in the number of nurses who were represented in the media. This is notable because, in November 2010, the Institute of Medicine (2011) released a special report that outlined the important role that nurses should play in the transformation of health care.

As part of our education at the Summit, we broke into workgroups and crafted pitches for the media. We then presented our ideas to a panel of journalists including writers and editors from the *Washington Post*, *Crisis Magazine*, and National Public Radio.

At the Summit, we also learned that nurses are absent from policy articles. Mason and Glickstein pointed out that often, nurses don't prioritize being responsive to the media when it does reach out for information. And, nurses rarely refer to themselves as experts,

even if they have many years of nursing experience under their belts.

Now is not the time for modesty. Nurses have a unique perspective on health care and your voice is more critical during this pandemic than ever before. I understand you may be more comfortable talking about the nursing profession than health care policy, but now that you've witnessed a system that failed, it's a great time to think about how you can change that, too.

What AAACN is Doing and How You Can Help

AAACN is building a greater media presence. As the communications director, I'm working diligently to reach out to reporters and social media influencers every day. Your AAACN team and staff members are expanding our media databases and educating members, volunteers, and leaders, providing them with media training and other tools. As a valued AAACN member, all of our resources (including me, personally), are available to you as well.

Our work has already had an impact. Even before COVID-19, AAACN's leaders and volunteers were quoted in an increasing array of publications and websites. And now, during the pandemic, we've been able to leverage the nursing spotlight to broaden our exposure even further and build deeper connections with national mainstream and health care media.

With the current flood of attention on nurses and the designation of 2020 as The Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, now is the perfect time to expand the narrative and help Americans understand what nurses do. After all, there are approximately 3.5 million registered nurses in the U.S. That's a lot of voices. ●

Janet Perrella D'Alesandro is AAACN's Media and Communications Director. If you have ideas on increasing media exposure for nurses, a good media contact for her to reach out to, or if you'd like media coaching, she may be contacted at janetd@ajj.com; 856-256-2422.

References

Institute of Medicine. (2011). *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*. The National Academies Press. <https://www.nap.edu/read/12956/chapter/1>
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). *Occupational employment statistics*. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area_emp_chart/area_emp_chart.htm

What You Can Do to Help

How to educate yourself and help nurses' voices be heard:

- **Read** *From Silence to Voice: What Nurses Know and Must Communicate to the Public, Third Edition*, by Bernice Buresh and Suzanne Gordon.
- **Work with your place of employment** to develop nursing media competency.
- **Reach out to local or national reporters** with your opinions and ideas; educate them about the many facets of nursing practice.
- **Use social media:** Make comments on health care articles, policy issues, or pertinent research in your area of expertise.
- **Write** a Letter to the Editor, an op-ed, or an article in response to something you've read in a local or national publication.
- **Educate** your family, friends, and community about the scope of nursing practice and value whenever you get the opportunity.

Additional resources:

- Learn more about the Woodhull Study by visiting <https://nursing.gwu.edu/woodhull-study-revisited>
- View the slide show, "The Woodhull Study Revisited," at <https://spark.adobe.com/page/fihf6B9euWrSF/?red=a>
- Read the article, "Beyond the Food and Tchotchkes: A Challenge for Nurses Week" on the Campaign for Action website at <https://campaignforaction.org/beyond-the-food-and-tchotchkes-a-challenge-for-nurses-week/>