

# Scrubbing In...Needs to be Scrubbed OUT

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**The Twitter and Facebook** accounts of the nursing community are fired up after the premier of MTV's new reality series, *Scrubbing In*, debuted a few weeks ago. A *Jersey Shore* version of nursing, *Scrubbing In* has enraged nurses from around the globe with its misguided representation of the nursing profession. Barbara Mildon (2013), president of the Canadian Nursing Association, which represents 150,000 registered nurses from across Canada, wrote a letter to MTV stating, "*Scrubbing In's* dramatized account of nurses' lives trivializes the critical work they perform. All of their hard work, from studying and gaining experience, to answering nursing's call, will be overshadowed by typical 'reality' show fodder." Dianne Martin (2013), executive director of the Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario, representing more than 38,000 RPNs throughout the province, also wrote, "I could tell you that, as a nurse, I'm insulted by the show's stereotypical characterization of nurses. I could tell you that stereotypes are ignorant, demeaning and damaging. I could tell you that the caricature of the 'sexy nurse' is outdated and worn out." Nurses are indeed fuming at MTV's portrayal of their work.

While petitions to cancel the series are being signed and blog posts are carving out their opinions, I ask: "How did we get here?" How did our profession turn into a reality series that associates nursing with partying, drinking, dancing and sexual philandering, rather than with the intelligent and respectful contribution to expert clinical care that we know it to be?

And... is MTV the culprit here? After all, the channel is in the business of entertaining. Money is what drives its mandate, regardless of who or what it is exploiting. I am by no means arguing that what MTV is doing is right or justified. But I do think that nurses, as a profession, need to take some responsibility for allowing these "reality" stars (consider – they really are nurses) to misrepresent who we are as professionals.

After watching a presentation on leadership by Drew Dudley (TED Conferences 2010), I realized that this situation might be merely the symptom of a “missed opportunity.” Do we recognize and make visible the scope, breadth and depth of nursing knowledge, skill and leadership as it plays out across our nation every day? While we do formally acknowledge the leadership of our most prestigious and esteemed professionals (and they are well deserving), are we missing the expanse of leadership contributions of direct-care nurses enacted in the course of daily practice? Does our inability to activate, access or even acknowledge these contributions render them insignificant at best, and invisible at worst? If nurses have not made a “revolutionary” advancement in the profession, if they are not on the road to a PhD, if they are not sitting at high-level decision-making tables with the movers and shakers of healthcare... do we believe they are not leading?

In his talk about leadership, Dudley concluded:

I have come to realize that we have made leadership into something bigger than us; we made it into something beyond us; we made it about changing the world, and we've taken this title of leader and we treat it like it's something that one day we are going to deserve, but to give it to ourselves right now means a level of arrogance or cockiness that we are not comfortable with. I worry sometimes that we spend so much time celebrating amazing things that hardly anybody can do that we've convinced ourselves that these are the only things worth celebrating, and we start to devalue the things we can do every day. We start to take moments when we truly are a leader and we don't let ourselves feel good about it. (TED Conferences 2010)

Perhaps nursing needs to acknowledge and celebrate its everyday leadership.

And what of the leadership capacity of the newest cohort of nurses: the millennial generation? This generation of professionals has been touted as “highly educated, self-confident, technologically savvy and ambitious” (McGrath 2011). Having been raised in an environment of perpetual feedback and validation (for which the earlier generations are collectively responsible), millennials are entering the workforce expecting appreciation for the intellect they bring and constant appraisal and reward for work most prior generations would consider “just part of the job” (Duchscher and Cowin 2004). A colleague of mine who is studying the millennial generation's perceptions of leadership wrote:

Only one of my research participants could identify any person in leadership outside their local hospital unit. Some barely knew who their manager was. When asked to identify who the leaders were on their unit

they almost always named nurses who worked alongside them; some didn't even consider their charge nurse to be leaders, and most made a clear distinction between management and leadership" (A.M Offiah, RN, BScN, MN(s), personal communication, October 30, 2013).

Is it possible that "leadership" is defined completely differently in the newest generation of nurses? Does "everyday leadership" resonate more with this cohort, rather than the traditionally recognized leaders of this profession? I encourage us to pause for a moment and consider what it would mean to this generation if we started celebrating everyday leadership.

This colleague added that unless nurses perceive themselves as leaders, they are prone to the devolution of their self-image as reflected in *Scrubbing In*: "At the 1–3 month mark of working, none of the new graduates perceived themselves as leaders" (A.M. Offiah, personal communication, October 30, 2013).

Have we muted the voices of our future leaders? I suggest that it is time to reconsider the lens through which we view leadership, to take pride in and ownership of our everyday opportunities to lead in practice and draw on the creativity and (as yet) unencumbered faith in the nursing profession emanating from our newest members. Dudley stated, "As long as we make leadership something bigger than us, as long as we keep leadership something beyond us, as long as we make it about changing the world, we give ourselves the excuse not to expect it every day from ourselves and from each other" (TED Conferences 2010). Maybe reclaiming everyday nursing practice as leadership is the inspiration we all need to turn MTV off and the future of our profession on.

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#### Note

For an additional perspective on *Scrubbing In*, see the commentary by CJNL editor, Michael Villeneuve at: <http://www.nursesunions.ca/news/nurses-power-regaining-their-image>