

Establishing Good Relations with the Press and other Media, and with the Public through such Media

by Pat Jarrett

Woman's Editor, Sun News-Pictorial, Melbourne

THE media of communication are many. They include, as the best known, the Press, and pre-eminently the daily newspapers, radio and television. All are powerful and far-reaching and, in the case of television, particularly intimate.

In the modern world, a sound, well planned public relations policy is of enormous value to any association of professional people, i.e., nurses, if they are to make the best use of these means of communication to keep the public informed.

Professional status can be improved, professional objectives achieved, only in a climate of public interest and sympathy. The more the public is reminded of the work of the nursing profession, the more it becomes informed about the problems of the profession. The individual nurse is better able to achieve the range of her ambitions—whether these ambitions are connected with better working conditions or salaries, or with a better opportunity to help patients—if she enjoys an informed, sympathetic public.

I have been actively engaged in newspaper reporting for 27 years. One of my assignments each day as a cadet or cub reporter, was to make a call, before the last edition, to each of the Melbourne metropolitan hospitals—an accident check! That was how I made my first contacts with members of the nursing profession. But the nurses—and the journalists—of those days, have all moved to higher status; life for people in professions has become increasingly complex, busy and impersonal, and many of the contacts which were once normal, have been lost.

If we take the case of the allied professions of medicine, it seems to

me that very real problems have arisen in establishing good relations with the public through the Press and other media, with the development of huge hospitals serving growing metropolitan populations, and of clinics, group practices, National health services and so on.

The days have gone when the general practitioner—"the family doctor"—was known to all the people in his neighbourhood. At least, this is so in the cities. Doctors cannot expect public understanding of their position, or sympathy with their problems, if the public no longer knows what their position is, or what their problems are.

The position of the nursing profession is not dissimilar. It is not an uncommon complaint of patients in some Australian hospitals at least, that, because of staff rostering, they never get to know their nurse. It's worse still from the patient's point of view—when ever he gets a nurse to understand his needs, she is changed, someone else comes on duty, and he has to start all over again.

This multiplicity of nurses looking after one patient may not arise in some hospitals, but it is typical, of the de-personalisation which is going on along the whole medical front.

To the hospital patient, the nurse may be someone who looks after him this morning, but whom he never sees again. To the ordinary citizen, the doctor may be someone whose name he has taken out of a telephone directory, or an even more shadowy figure in some hospital or clinic whose name he does not even know.

All this means that most of the old ways by which doctors and nurses made themselves known and

understood in the community have gone, or are going.

Individuals or groups, professional or otherwise, who do nothing about making themselves known and understood, invariably suffer the consequences. They are passed over in the community; forgotten.

Business has long come to realise that it is not sufficient to do a good job—it must be shown to as large a number of people as possible that a good job is being done. This is the essence of public relations.

The conscious public relations policy adopted by a professional association today must be sound and realistically planned. It must project an accurate as well as a favourable image on the public consciousness and, it seems to me, in the case of nursing, that a great deal of public relations must have as its objective, recruitment of suitable people into the profession.

For the nurse, the demands on human quality are great and continuous. Few human activities require, to be effective, such a sustained sense of vocation and dedication. But it would be tragic if nursing were "over-glamorised"; equally tragic if it were represented as a profession filled with saintly, selfless drudges.

Young women must see in nursing a career which makes demands upon intelligence, self-discipline and physique—a career in which womanly compassion and womanly practicality is at a premium. But they must also see it as a career which offers adequate economic

A paper presented at the
ICN 12th Quadrennial Congress
(Public Relations.)

rewards and security, as well as freedom in choice of employment.

The advancement of the profession will keep step with public comprehension of the value of nursing, if the public relations policy is realistic and vigorous. Whether this is done by an individual or a group, who still prefer to conduct their own public relations by direct contact with the people engaged in the means of communication—press, radio and television—or by a paid public relations expert, is a matter of choice and finance.

Like most professions, nursing has, from time to time, been the object of controversy. Do not be afraid of controversy. Evolution is achieved only in the face of controversy. Nurses should be encouraged, rather than discouraged from expressing opinions publicly on problems affecting their profession as a whole. By the nature of their work and their qualifications, they have a great deal to contribute to the development of new and sounder social attitudes.

The Press, indeed all mass communications media—are sympathetic. If approached with candour and lack of concealment, in even the most controversial matters, newspapers will show a degree of responsibility and fairmindedness in a field such as nursing, which one would not expect after their performances in other fields such as those of politics. It has been my experience that nurses get a more sympathetic hearing than most from members of the Press.

As a rule, it is important that you deal with senior people in the Press, radio and television, wherever possible. Where matters arise, do not hesitate to make the first approach rather than wait for "something to leak out" and then have to deal with a suspicious and subconsciously sceptical reporter. Treat legitimate Press inquiries courteously—there are few in my profession who cannot recall at least one good "brush" with a member of your profession wary of the Press. Where inquiries are not legitimate, say so—and telephone the Editor and tell him so.

Journalists, too, have a Code of Ethics.

There is enormous competition in all media of communication—a fact not always recognised by people anxious to get their story over. A daily newspaper discards enough readable material everyday to make several other newspapers. Obviously, a newspaper must be highly selective. It will publish, in the first place, what it considers is of great importance to its readers. The newspaper will, if it is a responsible publication, as most newspapers are, publish also a good deal of material purely as a community service—it will also go to great lengths to help charities and other causes.

But there still remains a lot of other news which, important though it is to the people immediately concerned, is not necessarily of great interest to anyone else. This must take its chance with a lot of competitors. Obviously it will stand a much better chance of publication if it can be presented in an interesting way, and in a form of which newspapers can make use. Equally, it is no use putting up to radio and television, an idea which anyone in the business will immediately see is hopelessly impracticable.

That, of course, is why many organisations engage specialists in public relations—not with the idea of putting something over the newspapers or the public, but to ensure that the case is put in such a way that it will have a fair chance—just indeed as I would engage a nurse, if my health required attention that I was not trained to give myself.

In Australia, which inherits a good deal of English reticence, some professional organisations in the past have been wary of the Press, although they have not hesitated to call upon it when they have been in urgent need of help. But that attitude has largely gone, and today it is realised that press and professions can be mutually helpful. In this city of Melbourne, for example, very large sums of money have been raised for hospitals by Press and radio appeals.

Other aspects of communica-

tion are the women's sections of newspapers and women's sessions on radio and television. Fortunately, many of the old time ideas, that you had to belong "in society" before you could get your name into the women's pages of newspapers have gone. All big daily newspapers publish large sections devoted to women's interests. These columns are always open for stories about the nursing profession. Radio and television also seek appearances of women in the professions for interviews and panel discussions of community interest.

But never fall into the error of thinking that newspapers, radio stations and television channels "want" stories—they are engulfed in stories. But, if you have a story to tell or a case to make, then you have got to see that it stands up on its own merits. If you, as a profession, cannot draw from your ranks, nurses capable of handling this work—and it is a specialised field—then there is a case for the employment of a public relations expert to tell the story or to make the case that will appeal to the newspapers and other media.

Now, I understand that this is the first time the subject of Public Relations has been given such prominence at the International Council of Nurses' Congress. Your Congress planners have been wise to do this, since the dissemination of information about anything in this modern world is now an exceedingly complex business.

It is not good enough any longer to leave your story in the hands of a reporter believing that it will be published, or told, simply because that reporter has always been sympathetic to your objectives. Daily competition for space in all communication media is too keen.

You should get to know the men and the women who deal with the news and they should get to know you. Confidence, trust and a healthy respect for each other will follow—and with it, a public that is much better, informed and much more interested in the nursing profession.