

# Major research project highlights the changing face of nurses in films over the last 100 years

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An extensive study of how the nursing profession has been portrayed in films over the last century has shown that unflattering stereotypes are becoming less common and nurses are now being portrayed in a more positive light.

Australian nurse researcher Dr David Stanley reviewed more than 36,000 film synopses and watched 280 films made between 1900 and 2007 for his research, published in the latest issue of the UK-based *Journal of Advanced Nursing*.

"Public perceptions of different professions are strongly influenced by the media and in the past the way that nurses have been represented in feature films has often been at odds with the way nurses perceive their profession" says Dr Stanley, a lecturer in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Curtin University of Technology, Perth.

"Nurses need to be aware of how they are portrayed in films and to work positively and proactively with the media to create a realistic and accurate image of themselves and their profession."

Dr Stanley says his research has revealed significant changes in the way nurses have been portrayed in films over the last century.

"In early films, nurses were seen predominantly as heroines, romantic

leads, sex objects or self-sacrificial carers, with the First World War featuring in many storylines.

"More recently there is evidence of film makers moving away from the stereotypical themes of the past.

"Nurses today are represented as much more than angels and devils, doormats and divas, as films start to recognise that nursing provides fertile ground for a wide range of plot devices.

"Now they are often portrayed as intelligent, strong and passionate characters and film makers are increasingly turning to nursing characters who offer a broader, deeper and authentic representation of modern nurses and nursing."

More than 800 films were identified from 36,000 synopses and 280 English language or subtitled films were studied in detail, as nurses formed an integral part of the plot. The majority of the films came from the USA (64 per cent) and the UK (12 per cent). Other countries included were Australia, France, Mexico, Spain and Germany.

The number of films reviewed ranged from nine in 1920-29 and 17 in 1900-1919 to 41 in 2000-2007 and 33 in 1980-1989. Pornography was specifically excluded, with the author preferring to focus on mainstream film releases.

"Just over a quarter of the films I looked at (26 per cent) featured an overtly sexual representation of nurses, an image that has negative implications for nursing professionals" says Dr Stanley.

"I also noticed that as the nursing profession has grown there has been a corresponding decline in the representation of the self-sacrificial nurse in feature films, with a corresponding growth of dark nurses, who are

able to be both powerful and evil."

Dr Stanley says that the darker side of nursing appeared to emerge from the 1960s as women and nurses began to exercise more authority over their lives and bodies.

"In previous decades nurses had appeared in murder mysteries and in sinister roles – mainly in the 1930s – but when we get to the 1960s we start seeing nurses appearing more often in psychological thrillers or as psychopathic killers.

"The dark nurse did not always play an evil role, but they often represented the liberation of a repressed inner self in line with the development of women's power in the 1990s."

Today's film nurse is very different from the nurses seen in early black and white silent movies.

"The dawn of the 21st century sees the trend for films with strong, professional assertive self-confident nurses continuing and growing" he says.

"Feature films offer only a brief insight into how the image of nurses and nursing has been portrayed" concludes Dr Stanley.

"But while the general public continues to be influenced by what they see on a film screen or DVD, nurses need to be aware of how to counter negative images and build on positive ones."

Source: Wiley

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