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Pick Up That RN Flag and Wave It

By Pam Meredith, RN, NP
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A nurse who has written a book for the general public tells me that she has had to work hard just to get her RN title printed with her name and credentials on the cover. The publisher wanted her to use only "PhD" and not "RN, PhD." She is not sure why they wanted to do this, but my friend is a crusader for improving the image the public has of nurses and nursing. She understood how important it would be to let the public know that a smart, savvy, skilled nurse had done the research and written this book. So she persisted and insisted until she was heard. And now the RN waves like a proud flag after her name on the jacket of her book.

But the struggle is not over. When she goes on publicity tours to market the book, she has been dismayed to find that people who interview her for radio, TV, newspaper, and magazine stories are not interested in learning about her nursing background. Again, she knows how important it is for our profession that the media acknowledge her as an RN, and at every interview she proudly and emphatically makes the point that she was able to write her book because of her career in nursing.

In a similar vein, an important new research study conducted by nurses was recently featured in *JAMA*. One of its major findings — that the number of RNs in a hospital makes a difference in whether a surgical patient lives or dies (see "*JAMA* Study Reports Critical Consequences of Staffing Ratios," November 4, 2002, at www.nursingspectrum.com) is resonating and making waves in the field of healthcare and will no doubt influence the way others view hospitals and nursing for years to come. These nurse researchers can make us all proud, not only for the study they did to show the worth of the work nurses do, or the fact that nursing research was published in a prestigious medical journal, but because all the nurses in this study had the title RN printed after their names and credentials.

In a sense, these high-profile nurses are waving the flag of nursing to show others outside the profession who today's nurses are and what nurses can do. Sadly, this isn't always the case.

Unfortunately for us, another recent research study — important enough to make the evening news — was published in a medical journal and written by nurses who were not identified as RNs. The press releases and the byline for this article listed the MD after the physicians' names but only PhD after the nurse researchers' names. That same week, there was a press conference in Washington, DC, that introduced an

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important healthcare initiative in which the spokesperson for the group didn't reveal during the interview or on any of the printed material that she was a nurse. For whatever reason, she referred to herself only as "doctor."

I'm not sure why these contributors weren't identified as nurses, but I was disappointed to learn that the RN title was silent and invisible in both these instances. These would have been superb chances to publicize the contributions that nurses make and how nurses are changing the face of healthcare.

We're all proud when one of our own is out in front leading the way in some area of the healthcare field and telling the world what some of the best and brightest in our profession are doing. It promotes the image of nursing and boosts the morale of the rest of us, and we all benefit from the reflected glory that any of our nurse colleagues earns.

But each of us carries our own RN flag tacked onto the back of our name, and — just like the nurses mentioned above — each of us has the opportunity to wave it. We can start by telling others that our nursing education and experience give us knowledge and expertise that can profoundly influence the health of our patients. If our patients' lives are improved or saved because of our RN judgement and skill, we need to be less humble and self-effacing and claim that what we know and did made the difference. Why not add "intelligent, knowledgeable, competent, and capable" to our virtuous caregiver image and insist that we be recognized for our everyday nursing accomplishments, just as my friend who wrote the book and the RNs from the JAMA study have done?

At this time, when we're trying to change nursing's image and entice others to join us or to remain in our ranks, it's never been more important for us to shout it to the world that we are nurses — smart, savvy, and skilled — and that what we do and know matters. You've earned that RN flag. Now is the time to wave it.

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