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IN MY OPINION Teri Mills

The overdue appointment: America's nurse

Monday, May 30, 2005

If people take care of themselves and don't get sick . . . well, you know the rest. And who better to educate americans on how to take better care of themselves than nurses?

So, national nurses' week has come and gone, and what happened? Nothing, despite estimates that by 2020 there will be 400,000 fewer nurses than are needed in this country. Drastic action is required. And here's the action I suggest: Dethrone the surgeon general and appoint a National Nurse.

Here's why. Prevention is the best way to lower health care costs. If people take care of themselves and don't get sick . . . well, you know the rest. And who better to educate Americans on how to take better care of themselves than nurses?

After all, nurses are considered the most honest and ethical professionals, according to a recent Gallup poll. It's the nurse whom the patient trusts to explain the treatment ordered by a doctor. It is the nurse who teaches new parents how to care for their newborn. It is the nurse who explains to the family how to comfort a dying loved one.

Meanwhile, the surgeon general, the nation's head doctor, is all but invisible. If you went to a supermarket and asked 10 people the surgeon general's name or to describe his or her role, it's unlikely that you would find anyone who could. (It's Richard H. Carmona, by the way.)

Now, I'm not saying that a National Nurse will become a household name immediately. But given all that's at stake --the health of a nation -- and given the surgeon general's inability to connect with Americans, it seems to me that we should at least give nurses a try.

Here's what I'd have the National Nurse do. She or he would highlight health care education through 15-minute weekly broadcasts that would also be available on the Internet. The emphasis would be on prevention: how to have a healthy heart; how to raise your teenagers without going crazy; how to avoid being swept into the growing tide of obesity.

The Office of the National Nurse would yield benefits in a multitude of ways. The informational programs would decrease dependence on a health care system that is not only expensive but also -- at times -- inaccessible, especially for those who lack insurance or live in rural areas. Through the office, nurses could sign up for a National Nurse Corps that would organize activities to enhance health in their communities. A National Nurse would give public

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recognition to the valuable work that nurses perform each day; if we're lucky, the National Nurse would help stem the nursing shortage by attracting people to the profession.

A National Nurse won't solve all of our country's health care problems, but one would definitely improve the situation. America has a history of honoring great nurses -- from Clara Barton to Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail. Isn't it time we did so again?

2005, The New York Times

Teri Mills teaches nursing at Portland Community College.



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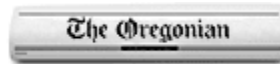
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