

The Daily News

**MAKE YOUR VOICE
HEARD!**

Using media to communicate your message.
By Jill-Marie Burke

Grace Groetzsch became Canada's first employed registered nurse first assistant (RNFA) in 1997. She's been working to educate the public about her role ever since. She recently had a unique opportunity to raise awareness when Ontario's Health Minister Deb Matthews came to her workplace – Sunnybrook's Holland Orthopaedic and Arthritic Centre in Toronto – to announce the government's permanent, full funding for the role. Despite having ten years of experience dealing with the media, Groetzsch was nervous about speaking in front of the Minister and in front of the hospital's CEO and board chair at the press conference. To calm her nerves, she kept the wise advice of her 11-year-old grandson top of mind: "just take a big breath, relax and start."

In addition to learning that important lesson from her grandson that day, Groetzsch learned a few other lessons courtesy of the media and RNAO. First off, she found out just how much time and effort goes into creating a television story. She spent four hours with a reporter and film crew. They were taping a *Health Watch* segment for *Global TV* that ended up being two minutes long. With RNAO's reassurance, she learned she could trust the reporter to make her look good. After all, her appearance at the media conference, and subsequent interview, were a last-minute request.

Groetzsch has had enough experience with the media to know how reporters can help nurses advocate. She understood early on that in order for the RNFA role to be funded, the public had to know it existed. “They (media) bring to light something that wasn’t known before, and that helps your cause,” she says. Her advice for nurses who find themselves in the media spotlight: try to have fun and enjoy the moment because “it’s not an opportunity that many people get.”

This is something RNAO’s Executive Director Doris Grinspun has been telling nurses since she took on the role in 1996. She encourages members to develop relationships with reporters in their communities and to embrace opportunities to discuss nursing, health-care and social issues from the RN perspective. “Through the media, you reach the public in a way that no other medium can,” she says. “It’s a way to share the expertise that we as nurses have – both individually and as a collective – and to speak out on issues that affect nurses and the public.”

For the past 15 years, RNAO’s communications department has meticulously monitored media activity. Staff track, on a daily basis, what reporters are writing and talking about, respond with letters, offer up the voices of members who can share an expert view on a specific issue, and read and watch broader health and health-care stories to determine what, if any, direction the association should take to include nurses in the discussion or coverage.

Groetzsch is one of many RNAO members who have learned how to leverage the media to speak out on issues. Still, there are nurses who feel that being interviewed by a reporter is an intimidating and nerve-racking proposition. In an effort to demystify the experience, *Registered Nurse Journal* asked media savvy nurses to share their experiences and advice...

TALKING TO THE PRESS IN TIMES OF CONTROVERSY

Providing nursing care during a political event and public protest that attracted worldwide media attention gave Sarah Reburn a rare opportunity to speak to reporters on behalf of those whose voices were not being heard. While working with Toronto Street Medics during the G20 Summit in the summer of 2010, Reburn treated fractures, lacerations and head traumas inflicted on protestors, in some cases by the police. She got hurt herself when a police officer hit her with his bicycle while she was administering first aid. But she says the reality she was seeing on the street

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— Lynda Monik

wasn’t being reported in the media. The mainstream media’s messages were about the destruction of property and the cost to the city. “What wasn’t told was the human impact and ... the trauma that was experienced.”

Twenty protestors were in police custody on conspiracy charges when Reburn spoke at a media conference organized by the Toronto Community Solidarity Network in July. In addition to recognizing this as an opportunity to call for the release of the protestors, and to draw attention to charges she felt were unfair, Reburn wanted to talk about the physical, spiritual and psychological trauma that the protestors experienced.

At least seven major news outlets pointed their cameras and microphones at Reburn during the press conference. A member of the Nursing Resource Team at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Toronto, Reburn wasn’t used to the attention, but says she warded off nervousness by thinking about the people she wanted to represent and the responsibility she had to her community to accurately represent the facts and tell the other side of the story.

“I prepped myself by thinking about all the other strong people and strong nurses I’ve seen give testimony and witness for their communities,” she says, adding that she was motivated by “the good changes their actions have brought about.”

WHEN THE MEDIA COME TO YOU

Susan Ray never dreamed that a study of homeless veterans (the first of its kind in Canada) would generate media interest across the country. She admits being surprised when reporters from the *London Free Press*, *National Post* and *CBC Radio* contacted her for interviews. The University of Western Ontario nursing professor didn’t send out a media release, and didn’t call the media to tell them about the study. What she did do was give the Ombudsman’s Office at Veterans Affairs Canada permission to give her contact information to reporters if they called to enquire about homeless veterans.

After Ray was interviewed for an article in *Salute Magazine* (published by the Royal Canadian Legion), the *Ottawa Sun* ran a short article on the study that was reprinted by Sun newspapers across the country. When the nurse researcher posted an online comment about her efforts to recruit veterans to interview, interest in the study snowballed. During the first week of January 2011, Ray did eight media interviews.

She then sat down with her co-principal investigator, Cheryl Forchuk, to get some advice on how to keep the media from sensationalizing the study. Forchuk recommended she settle on and emphasize some key messages. During subsequent interviews, Ray made it clear the study was looking at veterans who served on Canadian bases or as peacekeepers overseas (not Canadians who served in Rwanda, Somalia or Afghanistan). She told reporters the findings were preliminary and that she was not out to blame anyone for the post-war experiences (alcoholism and addictions) of the veterans.

Ray wasn’t only surprised by the interest, she was also taken aback by the speed at which reporters ask questions and expect answers. In order to keep her cool during rapid-fire questioning, she kept her facts in front of her and avoided making inferences or assumptions. “I had to be really careful that I didn’t say anything that I would regret.”

Advice From The Pros

Wondering how to put your best foot forward? We asked three journalists to tell us what they think nurses can do to get – and keep – the media’s attention.

PAULINE TAM / Health and Medical Writer, *Ottawa Citizen*

▶ **Make yourself available:** Return reporters’ calls promptly and offer back-up contacts if you’re not available. Journalists are looking for sources they can depend on, on short notice, and after hours

▶ **Be active on Twitter and Facebook:** “I have a whole new set of people that I think about now when I look for experts...and they’re one tweet away,” Tam says, adding that she ‘tweets’ an average of six times a day. While she doesn’t yet get many of her story ideas from Twitter, she says it’s a great way to find sources.

▶ **Take advantage of quiet news periods:** Tam recommends pitching story ideas at times when the news cycle is slower (like the summer) because “reporters and editors are looking for content during the slow periods when institutions aren’t working at full capacity and Queen’s Park isn’t sitting.”

JOE PAVIA / News Director, 570 News (All News Radio), Kitchener

▶ **Find a news angle:** Reporters look for experts to talk about topics that are front-page news. Whether the topic is head injuries in hockey or new findings on heart disease, if that’s your area of expertise, email or call reporters to offer a comment.

▶ **Think local:** No matter the topic, Pavia says you should be prepared to explain how a decision or initiative will benefit or affect people in the community. “I ask my team to look at a national or international story and ask themselves ‘how do you localize it?’” he says.

▶ **“Am I on the air?”:** Most people assume radio interviews are always live, but Pavia says that’s not the case. Interviews for news stories are recorded in advance and sound bites are selected for newscasts. Talk show interviews are usually live and may be conducted over the phone or face-to-face.

LISA MACDONALD / Assignment Editor, *CHEX Television*, Peterborough

▶ **You look fabulous:** “You have to trust that the person behind the camera is going to say ‘your hair is just a little bit off or your button is undone.’” Many people worry about how they will look on television, but reporters and videographers want you to look your best, she says.

▶ **Try, try again:** You don’t have to get it right on the first take. If you get nervous when the lights come on and stumble over your words, tell the reporter you’d like to do it again. MacDonald says it’s not a problem.

▶ **The perfect sound bite:** On television, you may have all of twenty seconds to make your point. In order to get your key message across, MacDonald suggests using phrases like: “If there’s one thing I really want to get across...” or “I think the most important thing people need to know is...”

GENERATING YOUR OWN MEDIA INTEREST

Lynda Monik finds that a proactive approach is best when it comes to dealing with the Windsor media. The communications officer (and former President) of Essex chapter, and CEO for Windsor Essex Community Health Centre, has discovered from years of experience that the key to being heard by reporters is taking the time to cultivate relationships with them.

“They want to write articles and stories,” she says. “It’s publish or perish for them. And they need people who can provide information, stories and data.”

Monik has built strong relationships and advanced her chapter’s communications agenda by doing just that. She’s also taken things a few steps further by arranging meetings with the managing editor of the *Windsor Star* to discuss nursing and health-care issues. She’s invited reporters to the health centre to have a coffee break with her staff, taken them out to lunch, and hand-delivered ‘Welcome to Windsor’ baskets filled with local products (and a personal note) to journalists who are new in town.

“When they get to know you, they’re comfortable calling you about a story and vice versa,” she explains.

Seven years ago, Monik and Essex chapter colleague Carol Kolga took another unconventional and proactive approach when they arranged a meeting with the advertising department at the *Windsor Star*. They asked if they could collaborate on a National Nursing Week supplement for the paper. Within a few months, Monik and Kolga had secured ad revenues of \$40,000 to fund the project, and provided the paper with a list of Nursing Week story ideas and nurse contacts for reporters to interview. The supplement was a hit with readers and has become an annual project for the chapter.

Each February, Monik and other members of the Essex executive meet to brainstorm story ideas that recognize local nurses. The media savvy RNs then give their list of recommendations to the *Windsor Star*, which assigns them to reporters.

These days Monik is working closely with the chapter’s current president Jennifer Johnston, who set the goal of sending out one media advisory or release for the chapter each quarter.

ANSWERING THE CALL OF RNAO

At an NDP media conference at Queen's Park in June 2010, Nickel Belt MPP and health critic France Gélinas was speaking about a private member's bill that would require calorie labelling on the menus of chain-restaurants. RNAO was approached to participate and Katie Dilworth, president of the Community Health Nurses Initiatives Group (CHNIG), was asked to be the association's spokesperson. She says she jumped at the chance because she believed the bill could have an impact on obesity rates across the province.

Dilworth has spoken to the media several times, and finds that being well-prepared is the key to a successful interview. Before she speaks with a reporter or attends a media conference, she prepares a description of the issue she will be discussing, three key messages she wants the public to know, and facts to support her messages. It's also important to know what other groups are saying about the issue so you are prepared to respond to their arguments, she says. "You can go into the interview feeling confident because you know what you're talking about."

In addition to the 'dos' of a successful interview, there are a number of things Dilworth advises nurses not to do. Don't speculate. Don't argue. And don't repeat negative language that a reporter uses. "If they say 'social programs cost us money,' don't repeat the phrase. 'They may use that as the sound bite,' she warns. Make your message positive by saying that social programs will cost less money than it will cost the

system down the road if nothing is done to address a problem.

While Dilworth understands the jitters that a media interview can trigger, she encourages nurses to take advantage of opportunities that come their way. "Don't say 'no,'" she advises. "There's an opportunity in every media interview to do good... nurses are passionate about things in our work. Your passion comes through in a media interview and increases credibility for nurses. We have this amazing ability to impact the public because of the degree that the public trusts us."

Mutual trust between nurses and journalists is another important aspect of media relations, says Kimberly Van Wyk, president of RNAO's Huron chapter and executive director of Clinton's Family Health Team (FHT). Van Wyk doesn't wait for reporters to come to her; she regularly calls them with story ideas.

Calling reporters with positive news stories is a good first step for nurses who want to build their confidence, she says, adding that relationship building means reporters may be more likely to listen to you, and respect your perspective when it comes to other issues. "If you can start with (stories) you're excited about, it makes it easier to talk to them when you're pushing an agenda."

Her advice for those who still have cold feet: "Just do it. The more often you do it, the more comfortable you are doing it." **RN**

JILL-MARIE BURKE IS COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER/WRITER AT RNAO.

For more tips, visit www.rnao.org/mediaguide.

Tips From Media Savvy RNs

Be ready to face the microphones, digital recorders and television cameras with this useful advice from colleagues.

DAVID MCNEIL / RNAO President

▶ "When the issue is a difficult one, expect tough questions. Do not get defensive. Take accountability for what is yours, and keep your responses factual. Always try to end on a positive note."

IRMAJEAN BAJNOK / Director of RNAO's International Affairs and Best Practice Guidelines Programs

▶ "I always keep the key messages I want to convey in my head. Sometimes the questions may take you in a different direction, but I always find a way to relate my answers to the key message."

LINDA HASLAM-STROUD / President, Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA)

▶ "Ensure that your statements are fact-based, accurate and trustworthy."

RAQUEL MEYER / RNAO Board of Directors, Member-at-Large, Nursing Research

▶ "My approach is to develop two to three short key messages and then to draft a list of anticipated interview questions with responses that incorporate those messages. Then I practise, practise, practise to gain confidence. With the media, I've learned the value of being grounded in my key messages."

MARILYN BUTCHER / co-founder of Canada's first nurse practitioner-led clinic in Sudbury

▶ "Even if the reporter becomes very friendly, positive and enthusiastic about the interview, never assume that the reporter is your good friend and will only portray you in a positive light."

PAUL-ANDRÉ GAUTHIER / RNAO Board of Directors, Region 11 Representative

▶ "I usually give the journalist an example. If you give them an example of a real situation, without naming anybody or violating confidentiality, they get it."