

Full Length Research Paper

Shifting the Narrative: Public Perceptions of the Nursing Image in South African Private Acute Care

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The aim of this study was to determine and describe the perception that visitors to acute care units have, regarding the image of nurses and nursing and to make appropriate recommendations to raise the profile of nurses and to encourage more respect for the profession. The public's image of nurses is tarnished by newspaper reports on poor patient care. A questionnaire was used to collect data from visitors of patients receiving acute care at two private hospitals in the Gauteng Province in South Africa. They were selected as a section of the public who were in contact with nurses and who were thus aware of what nurses do and the relationship between nurses and their patients, due to their family or friends being cared for by nurses. A convenience sample was used whereby the first 110 willing adults (18 years or older) who visited patients in two identified acute care units of two selected private hospitals in a specific week, during 16:00 and 20:00 h, were invited to participate in the study. The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics by means of a computerized statistical program and presented as frequency tables, pie diagrams, figures and percentages. The participants described a positive image of nurses and nursing. The results contradict the negative image of nurses as portrayed by the media. This could be due to the fact that, the media focuses only on newsworthy events in society, unfortunately in the majority of cases with a negative meaning. The results of the study, indicating a positive image of nurses and nursing by the public, could serve as a means to enhance the image of nurses by communicating it to the media. In the event of the media becoming aware of negative incidents, a cooperative agreement between the hospital and newspaper management should ensure that the true facts are being reflected in the reports.

Key words: Public's perception of nursing, status of nurses, nursing profession.

INTRODUCTION

A negative image of nurses by the public that portrays nursing as an undesirable profession, could affect the quantity and quality of persons who choose nursing as a profession. Currently, it seems as though there is a general perception by the South African (SA) public that nurses are no longer doing their work as they should. It is regularly reported in newspapers that nurses neglect patients (Pretoria News, 2009).

Nurses are, however, very often blamed for all the problems that are experienced in the healthcare sector. The public tends to view nurses and hospitals as the same

entity. When they experience problems such as delays in admission they blame it on the nurses. The reality is that unacceptable working conditions for nurses, poor funding of hospitals, long waiting lists for operations, closure of hospitals as well as severe staff shortages are some of the problems that the National Health System (NHS), and thus also the nurses have to endure (Seshoka, 2005: 32 to 33). This situation contributes to what Zondach (2004: 3) describes as a crisis for the image of nurses in South Africa.

A similar situation existed in 2004 in the United Kingdom (UK). Nurses in the UK felt that media coverage portrayed nursing as a profession in crisis. The results of a survey conducted by the Royal College of Nursing of the United Kingdom (RCN) in 1999, described nurses as

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hard working (84% of the participants) and caring (79% of participants), but not well educated, whereas only 52% of the participants considered nurses to be well educated (Payne 2000: 13). Very little research has, to date, been done on the public's perception of the image of nurses in SA.

The South African public generally lacks awareness of the vital role played by nurses in the healthcare sector as well as the services that they provide, as the doctors still continue to receive most of the credit for any positive healthcare outcome. The nurses are blamed for all the problems that are encountered. It is thus deemed necessary to make the public aware of the role that nurses play in the rendering of healthcare in South Africa to improve the image of nurses and to recruit prospective students in nursing science.

Campaigns to improve the image of nurses and nursing were successfully launched in the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The highlights of the United States campaign were an advertisement on television to improve the image of nurses, scholarship funding for students and lecturers in nursing science, the maintenance of a web-site to provide information regarding careers in nursing and brochures that were distributed to high schools to recruit prospective students (Moore, 2004: 16).

In the United Kingdom the journal 'Nursing Standards' managed a campaign in 2004 which was called 'Nursing the Future' to dispel misconceptions about nursing and midwifery and to empower nurses to portray a positive image of nursing (Waters, 2005: 25).

Personal contact with nurses influences the perception that the public of nursing and nurses have and can contribute to the decision to either become a nurse or to encourage someone else to become a nurse (Erickson et al., 2005: 49). It is thus important to know how people who have had recent contact with nurses and nursing perceive the profession and its practitioners in order to plan strategies to address negative images or to support positive images.

The purpose of the study was to determine and describe the perception that visitors of patients in acute care units of two private hospitals in the Gauteng Province of South Africa have regarding the image of nurses and nursing. Also, appropriate recommendations are made to raise the profile of nurses should it be required and to encourage more respect for the profession. Patients who are admitted to private hospitals in South Africa have medical insurance or have the financial means to pay for healthcare. At the time of the research patients from different racial and ethnic groups were nursed in the units. In acute care units the patients do not need intensive care but still need more specialized care than the care that is available in general medical and surgical wards. Visitors to patients were the participants in the study as they have either been in direct contact with nurses during visits to their family or friends or have been indirectly in contact with nurses through the narratives of

their family and friends of the quality of care that they were receiving during their stay in the hospital. The researchers considered them as people who were in a position to present an indication of the public's perception of nursing and nurses.

Definition of key concepts

For the purpose of this research 'image' refers to the character and reputation of nurses while the latter refers to all categories of nurses registered or enrolled with the South African Nursing Council. Perception refers to the "sensory information to an external object" (Tulloch, 1994: 1129).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

A quantitative, descriptive and contextual type of research design was utilized to gather information concerning the public's perception of the image of nurses and their profession (Polit and Hungler, 1997: 466; Brink, 2006: 103). The context of this study is the acute care units in two private hospitals in Pretoria, while the con-textual nature of the design refers to the participants and their perception of nurses and nursing, where either a family member or friend was being cared for by a nurse. In the acute care units, professional nurses assisted by lower category nurses took care of the patients. The professional nurses had at least completed 5 years of training and the lower category nurses who are called enrolled nurses completed 2 years of training. No differentiation in the questionnaires was made between the different categories of nurses as that were not the aim of the research. The image of nurses and nursing in general were the focus of the research.

The target population was selected as a section of the public with special interest in nursing, due to their family or friends being cared for by nurses at the time of the research. It was postulated that the visitors to family or friends in these units would display sufficient interest in the nurses caring for their family members or friends and would therefore, give consent to participate in the research.

The first 110 willing adults (18 years or older), who visited patients in the two identified acute care units of the two selected private hospitals in a specific week during 16:00 and 20:00 h, were invited to participate in the study. Only visitors, who appeared not to be upset by the condition of their family member or friend, were approached. Members who were visibly distressed or crying were not approached, as they would be unable to participate due to emotional trauma.

Five of the participants did not return the questionnaires, thus exercising their right to freedom of choice as stated in the letter of informed consent. A total of 105 of the participants completed a questionnaire in English or Afrikaans. The size of the accessible population were thus reduced (n=105). A convenience sampling method was used to determine the sample, which means that it is not necessarily representative of the larger population.

The questionnaire that was used by the RCN for a survey of public opinion on the image of nurses in the United Kingdom, served as the data collection instrument. The origin of the questionnaire is unknown, but according to Payne (2000: 12) this was the instrument originally developed for a survey conducted for the Nursing Times in 1984. The RCN used the same instrument in order to compare the public's opinion expressed in 1984 to that of the survey results in 1999. In 1999, a sample of 2000 people was interviewed and due to the number of participants and representation, the generalization of the research findings was indicative of

the whole population.

The instrument used by the RCN in the UK in 1999, was identified by the researchers as being compatible to the South African circumstances. The instrument, in the format used by the RCN, consisted of 16 questions with an option to 'agree' or 'disagree'. The researchers changed the questions into statements and added two more statements, namely 'I would like my child to take up nursing as a career' and 'Nurses and nursing are central to curing'. The 18 statements refer to the public's perception of the status of nurses in general, the nursing profession, the autonomy of the profession and nursing practice. A section on demographic information e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, workforce and educational level was also included. Each statement consisted of four ratings (Likert-scale), allowing the participants to rate how strongly he/she agreed or disagreed with each statement. The questionnaire was constructed in English and translated into Afrikaans to offer the participants the choice to utilize either the Afrikaans or English version. Permission to conduct the research in the two selected hospitals was obtained from the nursing managers. The visitor's lounges at the acute care units of the hospitals were utilized for the completion of the questionnaires. Visiting time in each hospital are three times a day. Two adults are allowed to visit the patients for 10 min at a time. There were thus visitors sitting in the lounge during the day waiting to visit their friend/family member in the unit. Sufficient time was available to approach the visitors with a request to partake in the research.

One of the researchers distributed and collected the questionnaires. The questionnaires were accompanied by a covering letter with a brief description of the purpose of the research in order to motivate the participants to complete the questionnaire. In the letter, the rights of participants to withdraw from the research were also explained. The questionnaire had been completed in a private area and complete confidentiality was assured. Completed questionnaires were placed in a box in the visitor's lounge. No pressure was applied on any person to participate in the study. Care was taken that the research process did not interfere with the actual visiting time. The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics by means of a computerized statistical program. Frequencies and percentages were calculated and presented in tables and graphs.

Ethical considerations

Approval of the research proposal was granted by the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethical Committee of the University of Pretoria. Informed written consent was obtained from the participants.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 105 visitors to patients in acute care units of two private hospitals in Pretoria who were willing to express their views concerning the image of nurses. The participants did not respond to all the statements relating to their perception about the image of nurses and nursing and/or questions on demographic information. The number of participants that did respond is therefore referred to throughout the discussion of the results and indicated as the n value, e. g. (n=105) in the case of a 100% response rate.

Demographic information of participants

Forty one participants (40%) were older than 55 years (n=103) (Figure 1). The majority of participants were

white (92%), with 3% being coloured, 2% black and 1% Indian (n=103) (Figure 2). A 'no response' category was reported. Thirty six participants (34%) studied at universities, while 3 of the participants (3%) have not finished secondary school. Twenty nine participants (28%) passed grade 12 at school, and 25 participant (24%) studied at colleges, while 7 participants, (7%) indicated "Other" as category of preferred choice (n=105). A "no response" category of 5% was reported (Tables 1 and 2). A category named "Other" was included to provide for the level of experience of informal training and recognition of prior learning as prescribed by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA), indicated in the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The majority of participants (44%) were professionals, while 33% indicated "Other" as category of choice, while there were no casual labourers. A "no response" category of 4% was reported (Figure 3). A category named "Other" was included to accommodate and provide for a phenomenon which the economists generally describe as participants working in the informal labour market.

Status of nurses in general

Six statements on the general status of nurses are depicted in the histogram (Figure 4). Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A "no response" category was reported.

"Nurses are extremely hard working"

The majority of participants either strongly agreed (56%) or agreed (39%) that nurses are extremely hard working, while only 4% disagreed (n=104) (Figure 4).

"Nurses are caring and understanding"

An overwhelming majority of the participants either strongly agreed (44%) or agreed (51%) that nurses are caring and understanding. Only 6% disagreed that nurses are caring and understanding (n=105) (Figure 4). It is encouraged to find out that despite severe shortage of nurses and accompanying high workload which leaves nurses with high demands on their time, nurses are still seen to be dedicated, caring and understanding by 95% in the public opinion, compared to 84% found in the public survey done in UK in 1999 (Hancock, 2000: 13). However, Dombeck (2003: 36) warned that the stereo-typical portrayal of nurses as caring and understanding could be detrimental to the monetary value and status of the profession ascribed by society.

Nurses are well educated

Most of the participants strongly agreed (45%) and agreed

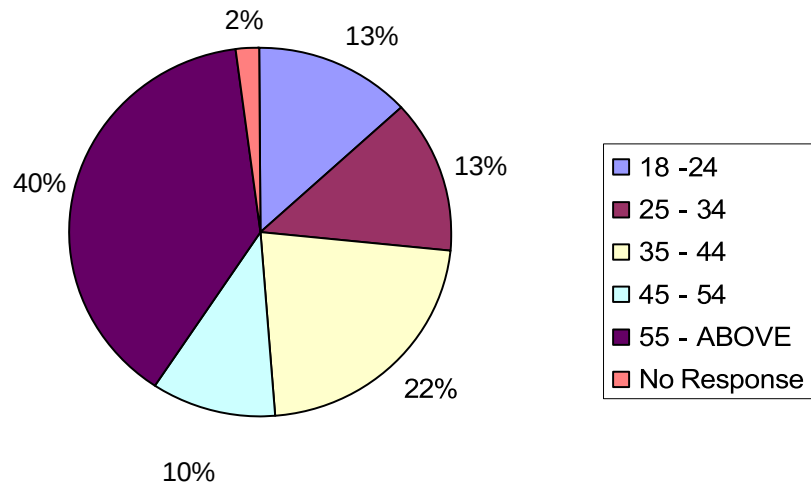


Figure 1. Age of participants (n=103).The majority of members of the black community who were approached to take part in the research had misgivings to sign the informed consent document, thus forfeiting their right to participate in the study.

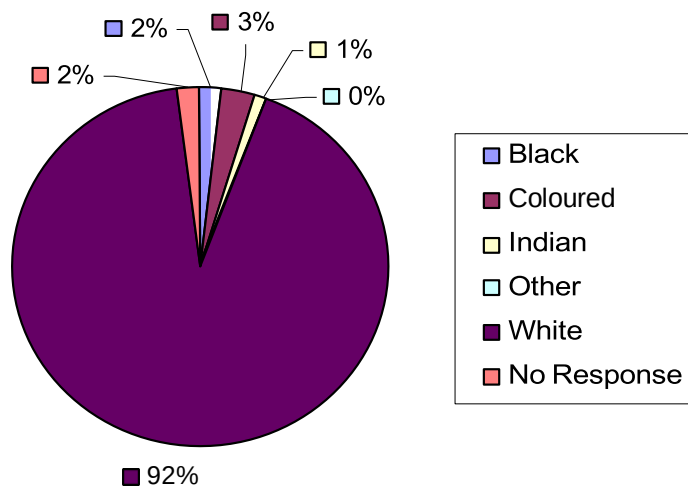


Figure 2. Ethnicity of participants (n=103).The majority of participants included in the research were females, (60% of 102 participants) as compared to males, (37% of 102 participants) (Table 1). A “no response” category of 3% was reported.

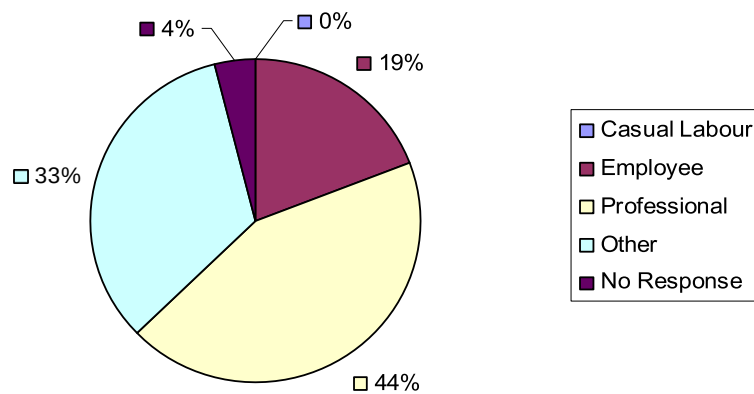


Figure 3. Workforce (n=101).

Table 1. Gender of participants (n=102).

Gender of participant	Frequency	Percentage
Male	39	37.1
Female	63	60.0
"No response"	3	2.9
Total	102	100.0

Table 2. Educational background (n=105).

Educational background	Frequency	Percentage
Grade 8 to 11	3	2.9
Grade 12	29	27.6
College	25	23.8
University	36	34.3
Other	7	6.7
"No response"	5	4.8
Total	105	100.00

role players in healthcare and in newspapers reports nurses are described as being more interested in having tea and lunch breaks than taking care of patients. Some politicians in South Africa showed their total lack of insight by publicly denouncing the value of a well educated and qualified professional nurse, stating that it is easy to get "a nurse from the street" (Mafalo, 2005, 2006: 14). It is unfortunate that politicians try to address the shortage of nurses by suggesting that untrained people can be hired to attend to patients.

Nurses are better at doing their job if they are women

Fourteen percent (14%) strongly disagreed and 46% disagreed that nurses are better at doing their work if they are women, while 17% strongly agreed and 23% agreed (n=105) (Figure 4). The public's perception and attitude towards men in the nursing profession is changing, considering that 60% (n=105) of participants in this study group were women. Results in the 1999 survey in the UK also dropped from 33% in 1984 to 13% of the respondents indicating that they believe that nurses should be women (Hancock, 2000: 13).

Nurses have sex appeal

The majority of participants either strongly disagreed (27%) or, disagreed (46%) that nurses are considered to have a strong sex appeal while only 5% strongly agreed and 20% agreed that nurses project a sexual image (n=102) (Figure 4).

Nurses are very authoritarian

Nurses are not always considered to be authoritarian as 6% of the participants strongly disagreed and 40% of them disagreed with the statement. Thirty seven percent (37%) of the participants however agreed with the statement while, 14% of them strongly agreed (n=102) (Figure 4). It is interesting that 51% of participants in the study compared to 8% in the 1999 UK survey believed that nurses are very authoritarian (Hancock, 2000: 13).

The public's perception of the nursing profession

The histogram in Figure 5 consists of three statements regarding the public's perception of the nursing profession. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A "no response" category was reported.

Nursing is a profession in its own right, not secondary to that of doctors

The majority of participants, 54% strongly agreed, 36% agreed, while only 7% disagreed that nursing is a profession in its own right and not secondary to that of doctors/medical profession (n=102) (Figure 5). Cheek (2006: 42) described the nursing workforce as "living on the edge", constituting at least 50 to 60% of the valuable workforce in the health industry where nurses are required to perform optimally with less resources and little support from employers. Although nurses are considered

to be of great value in health care in South Africa, they are not well paid. Unfavorable patient to nurse ratios due to shortages of nurses contribute to the stress that nurses experience.

Nurses are equally concerned with patients' physical and emotional needs

Most of the participants either strongly agreed (48%) or agreed (41%) with the statement while only 11% disagreed (n=105) (Figure 5). The positive way in which the public perceived nurses in this study could have been influenced by their gratitude towards the nurses caring for family or friends at the time of the study.

"I would like my child to take up nursing as a career"

19% of the participants strongly agreed and 43% agreed that they would like their children to take up nursing as a career while 8% indicated that they felt very strongly that their children should not take up nursing as a career. 29% did not feel that strong about their children that should not consider nursing as a career (n=104) (Figure 5).

Autonomy of the nursing profession

The histogram in Figure 6 consists of five statements on the autonomy of the nursing profession. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A "no response" category was reported.

Nurses are doing a lot in an effort to improve pay and working conditions

Twenty eight percent (28%) of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, while 54% agreed. One percent (1%) of the participants strongly disagreed and 13% reported that they disagree that nurses try to improve their pay and working conditions (n=101) (Figure 6).

Nurses are given a chance to use their own initiative in their work

Most of the participants in the study either strongly agreed (14%) or agreed (54%) that nurses are given a chance to use their own initiative in their work. Six percent (6%) strongly disagreed and 24% disagreed (n=102) (Figure 6).

Nurses obey doctor's orders without questioning them

30% of the participants strongly agreed and 54% agreed that nurses are obeying doctor's orders without questioning them, while 1% strongly disagreed and 14% disagreed (n=104) (Figure 6). A total of 84% of participants who responded to the statement perceived nurses as not questioning doctors' prescriptions, thus subjugating the status of nurses and the nursing profession to doctor's assistants. This response is in contradiction to the 68% of the participants who indicated that nurses use their own initiative in their work (Figure 6). A possible explanation could be that the public view nurses and doctors to work in close cooperation and that following the doctors' orders do not prevent nurses from using their own initiative in nursing patients.

Perceptions relating to the nursing practice

The histogram in Figure 7 consists of three statements relating to the nursing practice. Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. A "no response" category was reported.

Nurses are wasting a lot of time by doing nothing

The majority of participants in the study either strongly disagreed (33%) or disagreed (56%) while less than 10% of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed that nurses are at times wasting time by doing nothing specifically and are merely walking around (n=103) (Figure 7).

Nurses and nursing are central to curing (n=103)

An overwhelming total of 88% of the participants who responded to the statement strongly agreed or agreed that nurses and nursing are central to curing, while only 2% strongly disagreed and 9% disagreed (n=103) (Figure 7). Hancock (2000: 13) argues that nurses should put the patient at the centre of all stages of care, staying with them 24 h a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year, thus accompanying the patient and his family on the journey to recovery. Holistically, a nurse's role is central to a patient's recovery. When the critically ill patient in intensive care units recovers, it is not only the doctor that should get the credit but also the dedicated, caring nurse who carried out the doctor's prescriptions, administered treatments, monitored the vital signs and reported the patient's responses to the medical treatments as part of the independent function of the registered nurse (Cooper, 2004: 3).

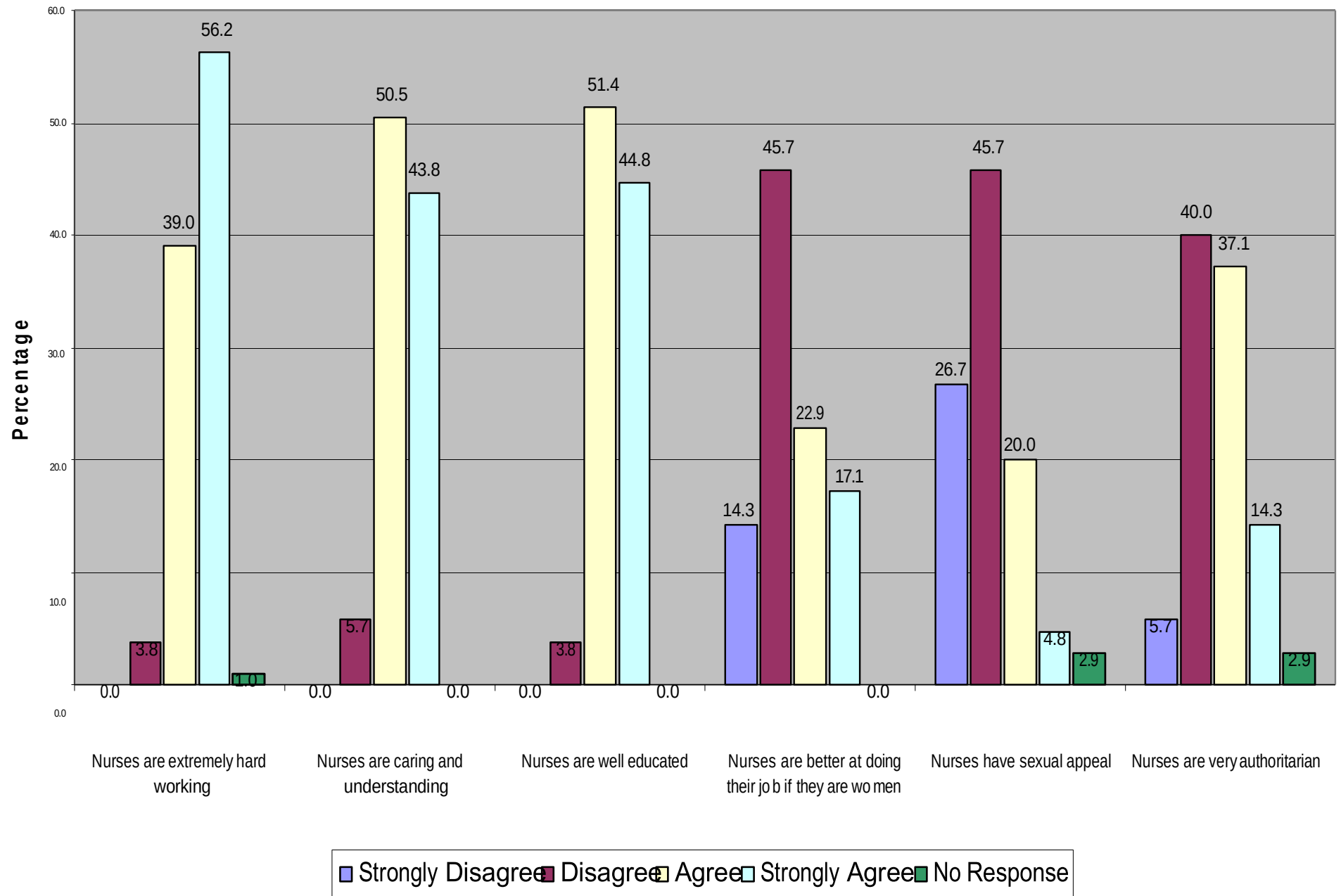


Figure 4. Status of nurses in general.

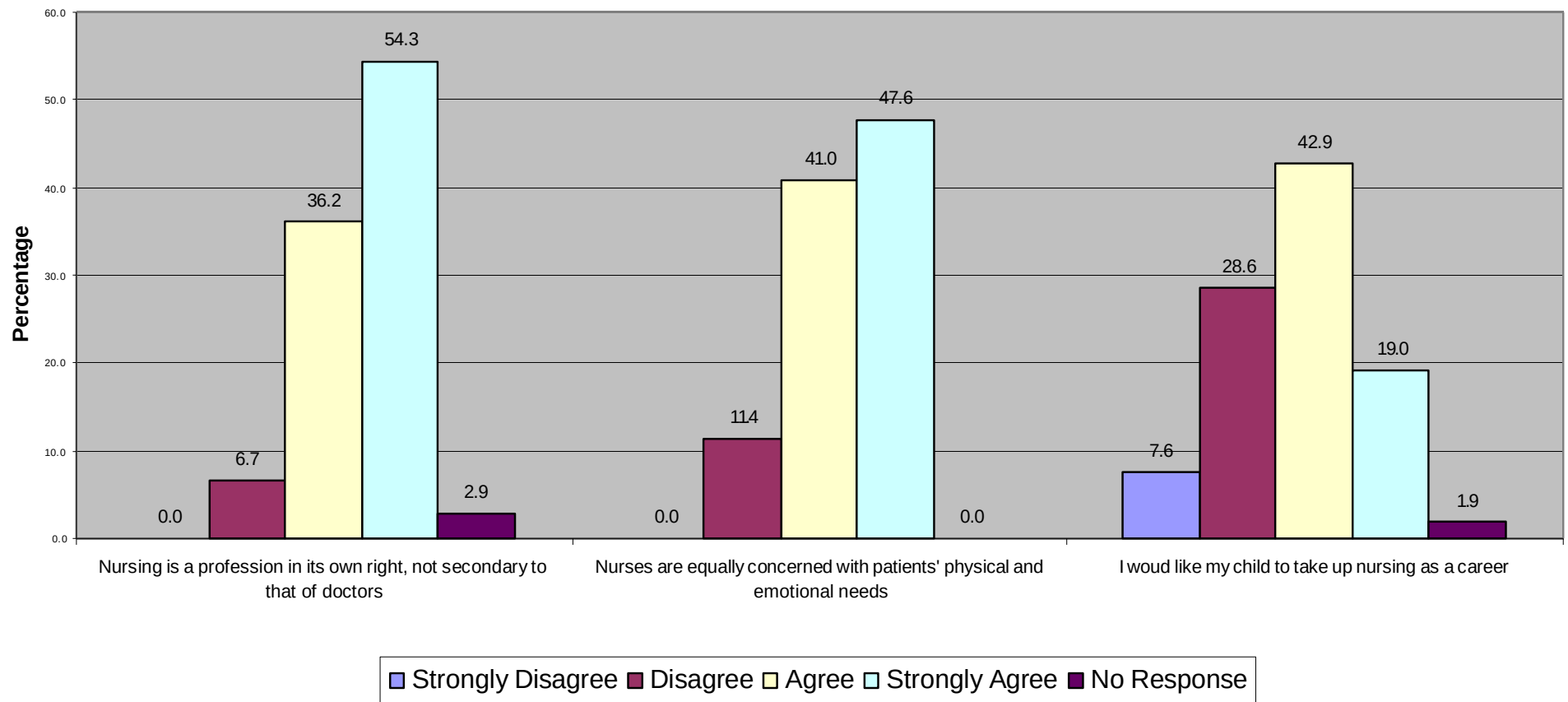


Figure 5. The public's perception of the nursing profession.

Nurses are more concerned with their social life than with their work

The majority of participants in the study either strongly disagreed (33%) or disagreed (61%) with this statement. Nurses are perceived as being hard working with little time for a personal social life. Less than 5% of the participants thought differently, of which 1% strongly agreed and 3% agreed with the statement (n=103) (Figure 7).

Summary of the findings

The findings of this study indicate that the perception of the image of nurses and nursing by the visitors of patients in two acute care units of two selected private hospitals in Pretoria is quite positive. The majority of the participants (more than 50% of the visitors) perceived nurses as hardworking; caring and understanding; and well educated. They also agreed that nursing is a pro-

fession in its own right and focuses on patients' physical and emotional needs. According to the perception of the participants, nurses usually obey doctors' orders without questioning them although they have also indicated that nurses use their own initiative in their work.

The majority of the participants believed that nurses are doing a lot to improve their pay and working conditions. The participants had a very positive perception of the role that nurses fulfill in

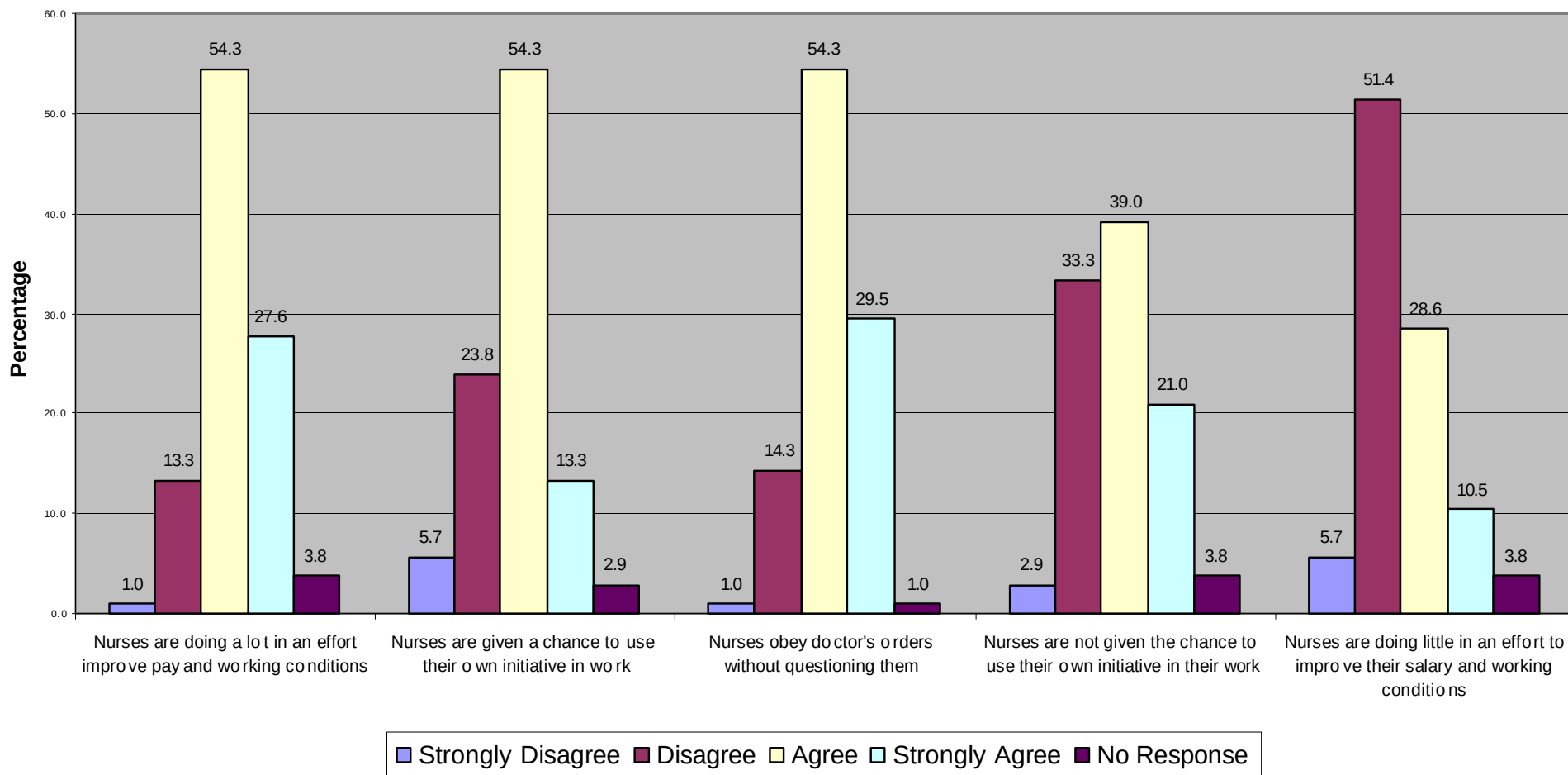


Figure 6. Autonomy of the nursing profession.

the curing of patients.

DISCUSSION

Discrepancies are identified in what nurses consider to be their roles in healthcare and in what the general public expect them to do (Takase et

al., 2001: 819). Nurses view their profession as independent from medicine. The view of the participants in this study that nurses usually obey doctors' orders without questioning them reflects the public's perspective that nurses rely on doctors to prescribe the care that patients need (Cooper, 2004: 3). This negative perception is further emphasized by the culture-specific

perception that nurses are 'selfless heroines' that answered to a calling (Fealy, 2004: 655) to become caring persons who are willing to do good to patients without any reference to the knowledge bases that is required to deliver quality nursing care (Dombeck, 2003: 361).

Negative news reports about the neglect of patients by nurses, also tend to focus on a lack of

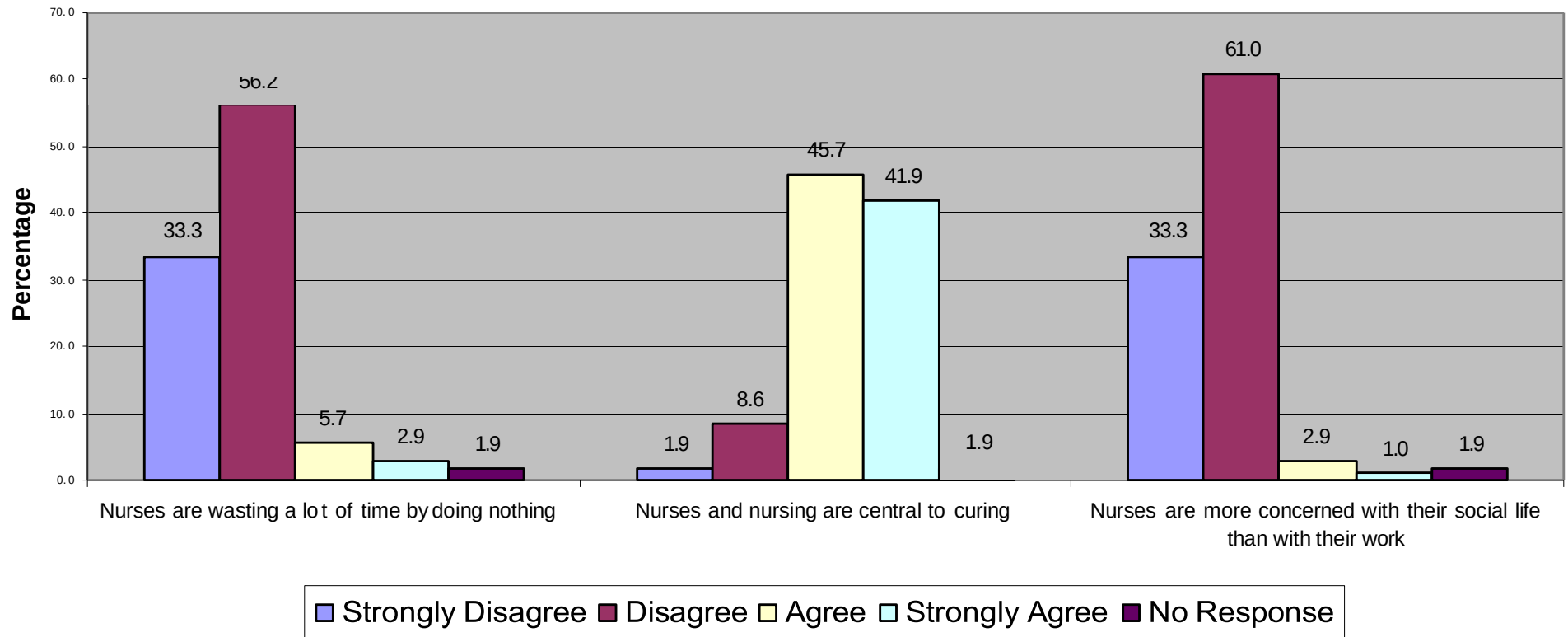


Figure 7. Perceptions relating to the nursing practice.

(Pretoria News, 2009) rather than to ascribe the poor quality of care to a lack of knowledge of nurses. In the public's perspective of nursing the caring qualities are considered to be far more important than the knowledge base of the profession (Gray, 2004: 3). Nurses are more often described by the public as caring individuals than as "critical thinkers and capable, intelligent problem solvers" (Erickson et al, 2005: 49). While the caring image is thrust on nurses by the public, it is at the same time utilized to create a negative

perception of the abilities of nurses (Dombeck, 2003: 361). The over emphasis on nurses as caring persons is unfortunately detrimental to the continuous development of nursing science as an academic discipline and nursing as a profession (Ohlen and Segesten, 1998: 720).

Caring is associated with softness, calmness and femininity and not with knowledge and independent decision making (Dombeck, 2003: 358). The public created an 'angel like' image of nurses to be people who always act in a morally

sound manner (Clarke, 2006: 388) and who by nature knows what is best for a patient. Nurses are even blamed for being too academic and not to be caring enough as if the two phenomena are not conducive (Scott, 2004: 12). The development and maintenance of a firm professional identity of nurses and nursing is required to integrate the caring expectations of the public with the independent functioning of professional nurses (Ohlen and Segesten, 1998: 726). Wright (2004: 16) refers to the challenge to nursing to utilize a caring

caring attitude in a knowledge based profession to do what the public expects, namely that a person's suffering should be diminished. Nurses should be proactive in educating the public about their contribution to the recovery of patients (Stainton, 2005: 16; Meier, 1999: 275). The public needs to be informed what the scope of practice of nurses is and that their only function is not to carry out the orders of doctors regarding care of patients (Cooper, 2004: 3). It will counteract the stereotyping of nurses being disproportionately young and inexperienced in contrast to doctors who are portrayed as male, middle aged and efficient (Lusk, 2000: 234).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the public be made aware of patients' experiences of good nursing as an attempt to counteract the negative publicity that nurses get when newspapers report on the neglect of patients. In the event of the media becoming aware of negative incidents, a cooperative agreement between the hospital management and the editor of the newspaper should ensure that the true facts are being reflected in the report. Senior nurses should be trained to act as media spokespersons to ensure that a positive image of nurses be communicated to the public.

LIMITATIONS

The researchers acknowledge the following limitations:

1. The majority of the members of the Black community who were approached to participate in the research refused to sign the informed consent document thus forfeiting their right to take part.
2. The results of the research represent only two hospitals in the private healthcare sector and therefore excluded the bulk of the private sector and also the whole public healthcare sector.
3. The relatively small sample size included a selective group of visitors of family or friends, who were either grateful or perceived the nursing care as being positive as experienced by the patients at that time.

Conclusion

In this study, the participants have portrayed a positive image of nurses that contradicts the overall negative image of nursing as portrayed by the media. This could be due to the fact that the media in general, focuses only on newsworthy events that unfortunately in many cases refer to the neglect of patients. The sample on the other hand, included visitors of patients who probably experienced good nursing care for which the visitors were very thankful of good nursing practice, as witnessed by

the visitors of patients has the inherent power to improve the image of nurses and thus also nursing as a profession.

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