



A Capital idea?



Are you a nurse or a Nurse?

Here we share a popular past editorial from our editor-in-chief on a topic that still resonates—how we identify ourselves to others.

WHAT'S THE CORRECT WAY to use the word “Nurse”? When should a lower case “n” be used? Or should the “N” always be capitalized? Should the capitalized word Nurse be used every time, in every media? What’s the difference between the use of the word nurse as a verb versus the use of the word nurse as a noun?

Think these questions are unnecessarily academic ones few care about except publishers? At first I thought so, too. But these questions are real ones I’m asked, and they make me pause and think beyond “when do I capitalize this word?” So bear with me a minute, keep on reading and I’ll try to make the case that when referring to the *noun*, the professional person, the use of “n” vs “N” unquestionably influences views and opinions, and at the end of the day, the patient’s perception.

The identity factor: Who are you?

Are you a *nurse*? Or, are you a *Nurse*? Are you a member of the *nursing* profession? Or, are you a member of the *Nursing* profession? Are you a *registered* nurse? Or, are you a *Registered* Nurse? Do you have a bachelor’s *degree* in nursing? Or, do you have a *Bachelor’s Degree* in Nursing? You can begin to see where I am going with this, can’t you?

Elementary school teaches us that capitalized words are usually formal titles. Titles that are not capitalized suggest a generic, informal title or the name of a large class of people sharing a title. However, as an example of capital confusion, think about the TV show, *Nurse Jackie*, where her job title was capitalized. In the televi-

sion listing, the show’s description would read either “In tonight’s episode, *nurse* Jackie battles with administration to get...” or “In tonight’s episode, *Nurse* Jackie battles with administration to get...”

The introduction: How important is it?

As another example, when you introduce a colleague to a patient, do you say, “This is nurse Gelinas, she will be taking care of you today” or do you say, “This is Nurse Gelinas, she will be taking care of you today”? You can’t see the capitalized Nurse in a spoken introduction, but the patient knows that Nurse is a title. Titles, by their very nature, command more respect than assignment to a general class of workers.

For contrast, listen to this introduction, “This is Lillie Gelinas. She will be your nurse today.” Can you hear or feel the difference? What if you didn’t use the word nurse at all and said, “This is Mary Smith. She will be taking care of you today”? I wish the answer was never! Small things can make a difference. What’s in print is guided by accepted formatting in use for decades, but what we say and how we say it can have a big influence on perception. Do you think changing how we refer to colleagues is a Capital Idea? If you agree with me, start introducing your colleagues using their title, not just their name. I’ve directly witnessed the difference in perception by patients and families during bedside shift report when the on-coming Nurse is introduced. Clearly, the professional hand-off is a very important start to building the trusting, therapeutic relationship essential to the entire experience of care.

By the way, here’s what I say: “I am Nurse Lillie Gelinas. It’s a pleasure to meet you. What can I do for you today?”

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