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'Nightingales' cleaned up

Bowing to audience complaints and advertiser defections, the executive producer of NBC's fleshy "Nightingales" said the series will show less skin and more nurses in uniform.

"We did some things we're not proud of," Aaron Spelling told reporters recently. "Mostly, we want to add to the patient-nurse relationship."

The one-hour drama depicts the trials of five less-than-brilliant and lusty nursing students. Spelling said if NBC renews the show, it would return without lacy lingerie, bouncy aerobic workouts and locker-room gossip-disrobing sessions.

Critics, including irate nurses, said it demeaned the nursing profession specifically and women generally.

More recently, the dessert and hot topic was cheesecake and "Nightingales" star Suzanne Pleshette ate it as real-life nurses told her how not to portray them as the confection.

Miss Pleshette also apologized for the NBC-TV series' portrayal of nurses as doctor-chasing airheads, and asked for their help: Save Our Show.

"You're looking at a hit show that's about to be canceled as a result of the controversy," the actress said. "Unfortunately, now the nurses are in a position to undo what they've done. They have to save us.

"Unless every nurse who wrote a letter before can fax a letter to NBC in the next two days, we may be over and out," said Miss

Pleshette, who portrays the "den mother" to a group of sex-kitten nurses.

Miss Pleshette and co-producer Douglas Cramer met with nurses at Union (N.J.) Hospital Monday to discuss how the program could portray nurses more realistically.

"Nightingales" is one of several television programs criticized recently by advocacy groups.

The Fox Broadcasting Corp.'s "Married...With Children" and NBC's "Saturday Night Live" have been slammed for their frank language and candid sexual references, and national advertisers have backed out of both programs.

Chrysler Corp. and Sears, Roebuck and Co. have pulled spots from "Nightingales."

"We're in a no-win situation," Spelling said of the assaults on the show, which premiered in January. "We've been beaten over the head with baseball bats."

Spelling, whose program "Charlie's Angels" brought bikinis and hot tubs to the world of TV private detectives, said the new "Nightingales" would have characters saying lines like, "All I want to do is be a good nurse and help."

The show's critics included American Nurses Association, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and several nursing schools.

"They're bimbos," Mary Ann Lewis, a president in the California Nurses Association, said of the "Nightingales" characters. "They're flighty females with few brain cells and they're not competent. The show doesn't depict

the nursing practice as it is today."

Spelling said he will add a nursing adviser to the show's staff and deal more realistically with the profession. He said, though, that the nurses will continue to have personal lives. "I'm not going to tell you there will never be a love scene in 'Nightingales,'" Spelling said.

Miss Pleshette said at the news conference that the actresses depicting the young nurses have been uncomfortable with some of the scenes they've been asked to play, finding them "repugnant."

She said the show had erred in its fascination with the nurses' shaving their legs and the "ridiculous underwear" some of the nurses were asked to step into.

"We make our mistakes often," she said. "We started from scratch and we were struggling. A lot of things we saw we didn't like."

Spelling said that in summer reruns, a much-discussed scene involving a nurse having sex in a linen closet will be excised from an episode.

Although "Nightingales" has won its Wednesday night time period in television ratings, its future is not certain. NBC's decision about renewing it is expected within three weeks.

Spelling and Miss Pleshette said they were concerned that advocacy-group complaints might possibly cross the line into censorship.

Said Spelling: "If you bow to every group of censors, there will be no television."