



No job is too small for Stefania Swiatek, whose work runs from handing out vitamins to saving lives



Focus puller Oliver Tellet receives a health check

Lights,

It's not all glitz for nurses working on film and television sets, as NEIL CROSSLEY discovers

There are times when you're stuck on a hillside in driving rain, being eaten alive by midges and with nowhere to shelter when you think "Oh please, get me back to a nice warm A&E department". But would I go back? No, never.

Stefania Swiatek is sitting in an Edinburgh hotel room recounting the pros and cons of her job as a 'unit nurse' on film and television productions. In 1997, after 12 years as a nurse in the A&E department of Glasgow's Western Infirmary, Stefania was offered some temporary work on a television series by a colleague of her television editor husband.

She never looked back. After starting a nursing agency, 'Stars', she went on to work on numerous major feature films and television series. Along the way, she has mingled with Charlie Sheen, Robert Duvall, Helena Bonham Carter and Ewan McGregor — 'Lovely guy,' she says. And, on top of all that, she even gets her name in the credits. 'That's always nice,' she adds.

The use of unit nurses to provide medical treatment for the cast and crew on film sets is nothing new. But in the last five years, a number of high-profile accidents and deaths on sets have prompted the Health and Safety Executive to tighten safety regulations in the film and television industry. The result is that an increasing number of nurses are now being employed to help impose a

more health-and-safety-conscious culture on film and television sets. For those more accustomed to the stresses of hospital work, it can be an immensely rewarding career.

As production executive with Working Title films, Sarah Jane Wright is acutely aware of the more stringent health and safety requirements. Despite the extra cost incurred by hiring nurses, she believes such measures are essential to help safeguard the cast and crew working in often hazardous situations. The carpenters, scaffolders, electricians and riggers who make up the crew are often most at risk she says. And she points to the massive injuries sustained by one electrician, whose scaffolding collapsed during the production of the film *First Knight* starring Richard Gere.

'Health and safety is now a major concern for every film-maker. As well as the welfare of your cast and crew, there's the worry of potential litigation. When something like that happens, it's the producer who gets sued and ends up in court and some of them never work again. Which is why pre-shoot health-and-safety inspections are now conducted. And why most film companies worth their salt will employ a unit nurse throughout.'

For the cast and 60-or-so crew members employed on a production, conditions can be tough. Most work a minimum of 12 hours a day, six days a week, and filming can last for four months at a time. Much of this time is spent on

location outdoors in often harsh weather conditions. Tiredness leads to accidents and colds and flu spread easily among cast and crew. For a unit nurse joining a production, the priority is preventing such problems occurring.

'I always make a point of walking around introducing myself at the start,' says Ms Swiatek, who is currently working on a television adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's trilogy *Sword Of Honour*, due to be aired next spring. 'It's important to let them know you're there to help and to try and find out if they've got any specific medical problems. Working long hours means they get run down and part of my role is giving out vitamin supplements and various homeopathic medications to compensate.'

Anecdotes abound within unit nursing circles of physical injuries sustained on film sets. Ms Swiatek recalls a late-night shoot when the crew were dropping like ninepins at the sight of one of their colleagues emitting clots of blood from his mouth. The man had suffered a post-tonsillectomy haemorrhage. As all the lights had just been taken down, she had to use torches to help examine and stabilise him while she waited for an ambulance to reach the remote location.

But, undoubtedly, the greatest challenge facing unit nurses is film stunts. Unit nurses will always 'walk' the stunt with the stunt person to assess what kind of injuries to expect should anything go wrong. Most unit nurses have a national network



Unit nurses depend heavily on their medical bags



Crew member Jon White gets Ms Swiatek's full attention for his bruised leg

camera . . . traction

of GPs they can call on who are sympathetic to the unsociable working hours of film and television productions. If a stunt looks particularly dangerous, the nurse will call out a GP and hire an ambulance for the day. Preparation and prevention is the key, says Ms Swiatek. But despite such measures, things do go badly wrong.

'I had one experience where a stuntman was supposed to get hit by a car and roll over the bonnet but he ended up going through the windscreen. Half the windscreen was in his head and he had a huge laceration. I just stopped the bleeding and tried to keep him still. I put a pressure bandage on his head, a big collar on him and checked his blood pressure. Then I reassured him while we waited for the ambulance to arrive.'

Away from the technological environs of an A&E department, unit nurses come to depend greatly on the contents of their medical bag. Some have been known to carry a whole range of technical wizardry around with them. But apart from basic items like sphygmomanometers and peak-flow meters, most cope adequately with a comprehensively stocked first-aid kit. Which can come as something of a disappointment to some of the cast and crew.

'Oh, I've been approached many times by people who want morphine for their bad backs,' laughs Terry McDonnell, who runs the Unit Nurses Agency and has worked on productions such as *TV's London's Burning* and the film *Star Wars*. Some expect you to have all these powerful drugs and equipment, and are disappointed when you don't. Obviously, we can't prescribe so it's not possible. You could carry oxygen but unless you had a very good case for giving it, you could be in trouble.'

Despite the legal restrictions on prescribing, unit

nurses occupy a far more autonomous role than their NHS counterparts. Unlike the hierarchical hospital structure, they have sole responsibility for the health of cast and crew and must frequently diagnose to identify the most applicable treatment. As such, many feel that they command more respect and enjoy a greater sense of independence than they ever would in the NHS.

Which is one reason why agencies receive a regular stream of calls from nurses wishing to work in film and television. All agencies require candidates to have A&E experience and trauma management experience is also preferred. 'You need to be able to hold down a situation and take charge of it,' says Mr McDonnell, who spent 10 years working as an A&E nurse at various London hospitals. 'And if you haven't got that experience of dealing with any eventuality, then you won't be able to cope.'

Money is another major incentive. Unit nurses can earn £130-£160 a day and working on commercials can pay over three times as much as this. On top of their salary, they will generally receive expenses of around £30 per day. Accommodation is provided for location filming, as is free food. 'There aren't many jobs where you're picked up, taken to work, given free food and accommodation and spending money to buy a drink at the end of the night,' says Ms Swiatek.

Mr McDonnell is less enamoured by the financial benefits, stressing that these rates are before tax. All courses necessary for continued UKCC registration must also be paid for, he says. And, unlike the NHS, there is little potential for career development. But despite these reservations, he does believe that unit nursing is one of the best short-term methods for earning quick cash.

There is a common perception that working as a nurse in the film and television industry is glamorous. 'Oh we soon put them straight about that one,' laughs Terri Sheed who, after 12 years as a sister at London's Charing Cross Hospital, took over the Millstream Nursing Agency. She has worked on numerous productions including ITV's recent adaptation of *Oliver* and BBC1's *The Lakes*.

'On winter days when it's icy, wet and cold, you'll be outside just like everybody else in the crew. I've stood in fields in the Lake District and my wet-weather gear has soaked through three times in a day. And you'll be standing around in that for 12 hours at a time. But if you can put up with it, it can be tremendously stimulating work.'

Earlier this year, the RCN published *The Nurse Entrepreneur Pack*. Its aim is to help nurses who are looking for means of earning an income in alternative environments. A spokesperson for the RCN says the guide reflects the increasingly diverse range of work available for nurses.

The idea of nurses leaving the NHS to pursue more lucrative and rewarding careers has sparked some criticism in the last few years. Many still clearly view nursing as an altruistic vocation and any attempt at external career advancement as a betrayal of trust. It is a point of view which incenses Ms Sheed.

'Most of us unit nurses have done our slog in the NHS for very little pay, thank you very much, and, frankly, there is only so much you can take. This way, we can use our qualifications to develop our own careers in something we really enjoy doing. We're working in a great atmosphere, meeting all kinds of people and we're not under stress. If you have the right experience and personality, then I would recommend it.' **NT**