

A Brief History of Nursing in the UK

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Introduction

“For many nurses, the skills of nursing or caring lie at the heart of their work. Until the mid-nineteenth century, nursing was not an activity which was thought to demand either skill or training. Nor did it command respect. As Florence Nightingale was to put it, nursing was left to 'those who were too old, too weak, too drunken, too dirty, too stupid or too bad to do anything else'. The intimate body services to be done for the patient were considered to be unseemly or immodest for young unmarried or well-bred females, especially if not a family member. Cleaning and feeding of another person were regarded as domestic tasks performed by servants.

Also, before 1880, the hospital treatment of illness was fairly rare. Where home services were adequate, a sick person was attended by the family doctor and nursed either by female family members or servants. However, from the middle of the nineteenth century, the discovery and application of anaesthetics and antiseptic surgery advanced medical technique and allowed all classes to seek treatment in hospitals. From the 1860s onwards, a series of nurses' training schools began to produce fairly large numbers of educated women who were eagerly accepted by hospital authorities whose medical officers, patients and public opinion in general were demanding higher levels of nursing skill in the wards.” (University of Glasgow; www.gla.ac.uk).

This description sets the scene for the rise of professional nursing that has gained in status and scope since the late nineteenth century. This paper highlights a number of key points in the timeline of professional nursing, nursing education and advances in medical care that influence the practice of nurses in the mid to late twentieth century, the time when most of our participants in the 'Memories of Nursing' project were working.

Timeline

Key

Profession of Nursing

Nurse Education

Medical Advances

1800

- 1796 Smallpox vaccine discovered by Edward Jenner
- 1816 Rene Laennec invented stethoscope
- 1818 British obstetrician James Blundell performs first transfusion of human blood
- 1844 Dr Horace Wells, American dentist, uses nitrous oxide as an anesthetic

1850

- 1854 Florence Nightingale goes to Turkey to lead a team of nurses caring for soldiers in the Crimean War
- 1855 Mary Seacole establishes the British Hotel, a convalescent home for soldiers in the Crimean War
- 1860 Nightingale Training School opens at St Thomas's Hospital in London. One of the first institutions to teach nursing and midwifery as a formal profession, the training school was dedicated to communicating the philosophy and practice of its founder and patron, Florence Nightingale
- 1867 Antiseptic Principles of the Practice of Surgery published by Joseph Lister
- 1887 British Nurses Association created; united nurses who sought professional registration
- 1899 Felix Hoffman develops [aspirin](#)

1900

1900s	More hospitals establishing their own training schools for nurses; in exchange for lectures and clinical instruction, students provided the hospital with two or three years of skilled free nursing care
1908	The first meeting of the National Council of Trained Nurses of Great Britain and Ireland was held in London
1914-18	World War One; Queen Alexandra Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) developed with 10,500 nurses enrolled
1916	Royal College of Nursing founded with 34 members
1919	Nurses Act established the first professional register help by the General Nursing Council
1922	Insulin first used to treat diabetes
1928	Scottish bacteriologist Sir Alexander Fleming discovers penicillin
1932	Lancet Commission on Nursing explores how to make nursing more attractive to young women in order to deal with shortage of trainees
1937	Bernard Fantus starts the first blood bank at Cook County Hospital in Chicago
1939-45	World War Two; many nurses enrolled in QAIMNS again gaining officer status
1940	The state enrolled nurse is formally recognised with two years of training
1943	Microbiologist Selman A. Waksman discovers the antibiotic streptomycin , later used in the treatment of tuberculosis and other diseases
1948	National Health Service offered free treatment for all at the point of care

1950

1951	Male nurses were allowed to join the professional register
1952	Paul Zoll develops the first cardiac pacemaker to control irregular heartbeat
1953	James Watson and Francis Crick at Cambridge University describe the structure of the DNA molecule
1967	Salmon Report proposes the development of nursing to include the management of hospitals
1967	South African heart surgeon Dr Christiaan Barnard performs the first human heart transplant
1972	Briggs Committee suggests a move to degree preparation of nurses and that practice be based on research
1978	First test-tube baby is born in the U.K.
1983	Griffiths Report establishes general management in the NHS, largely taking leadership away from nurses and doctors.
1983	United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting sets up a new professional register with four branches (mental health, children, learning disability and adult) reflecting former types of training and qualifications: Registered General Nurse, Enrolled Nurse (General), Registered Mental Nurse, Enrolled Nurse (Mental), Registered Nurse for the Mentally Handicapped, Enrolled Nurse (Mental Handicap), Enrolled Nurse, Registered Sick Children's Nurse, Fever Nurse, Registered Midwife and Registered Health Visitor.
1986	Project 2000 sets out the move to diploma level nurse training based in colleges/ universities rather than hospital based schools
1996	Dolly the sheep becomes the first mammal cloned from an adult cell

2000

2000	First draft of human genome is announced; the finalized version is released three years later
2002	Nurses are able to prescribe medication
2004	RCN votes for degree only preparation
2008	Nursing research demonstrated on the world stage
2009	All nursing courses in UK become degree level

Professionalization of Nursing

Therefore it can be seen that medical treatments and both professional nursing practice and education progressed considerably through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nursing became an organized group, adopting the four key characteristics of a profession as described by Blane (1991). Firstly the professions represent a highly skilled sector of the labour market with a defined body of specialized knowledge. This knowledge is transmitted to trainees who

are prepared in institutions under the control of the profession; the knowledge base is extended through research. Secondly, there is a monopoly on the field of work in that practitioners must be registered by the state as being suitable to practice the profession and there is agreement by substantial employers that only those registered will be given a job. Thirdly, there is autonomy in the organization, development and definition of the nature of the work undertaken. This implies that only a member of the profession is competent to assess another professional's work. Fourthly, there is a code of ethics that prohibits the exploitation of clients and regulates inter-professional relations.

All of these characteristics of a profession are now fully embedded in nursing in the UK. The specialized knowledge required to practice competently has expanded as new treatments have been discovered, necessitating enhanced knowledge and advanced professional decision making skills. This underpinned the move to higher academic levels and migration of education from hospital based schools, where the apprenticeship model of learning (and cheap labour) was common, to colleges and finally universities where all initial preparation is now at degree level. The early British Nurses Association led to the General Nursing Council being established in 1919; the role of registering members of the nursing profession was passed to the United Kingdom Central Council in 1979 and then to the Nursing and Midwifery Council in 2002 and these bodies also defined the scope of practice and codes of ethics.

Conclusion

The scope and status of nursing has changed since the days of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. The nurses who were recorded as part of the 'Memories of Nursing' project often practiced before the full professionalization of nursing took place, training in an apprenticeship model with little power or reward. However they often remember the standards of care at the time with pride, the responsibility they were afforded with acceptance and their rich, varied experiences with fondness. The transition taken place in nursing perhaps has not all been positive and the need for caring, compassionate and competent nurses remains as important today as ever.

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