

NURSING SKILLS

4: Nursing education



Photograph of nurses in a classroom

Circa 1920-1930, location unknown



Royal College of Nursing

4: Nursing education

A skeleton stands at the side of the classroom as the students focus on an “exploded skull,” a model that displays the bones of the skull separated from each other. This is an early 20th century anatomy class for nurses. We expect nurses to have received specialised education, but this has not always been the case.

19th century nursing

During 19th century, anyone could call themselves a nurse. However, as medical practices developed, the range of knowledge and skills required of nurses was increasing. For example, with the introduction of anaesthesia, surgical nurses became responsible for post-anaesthesia care. They also administered the new analgesics introduced for pain relief. As knowledge of diseases increased, nurses were required to monitor and report patients’ symptoms, and as germ theory became accepted, they worked to control infection.

In hospitals, new nurses began to be trained on the job; first observing and then assisting the more experienced nurses. In this early nurse

training, hands-on experience and developing good character were prioritised over theoretical study and exams. Indeed, at the nurse training school Florence Nightingale established in London in 1860, the first students complained that they learned little more than how to be obedient.

What nurses needed was to understand both the processes going on inside patients’ bodies and their treatments. Eventually, nurse education developed into a mixture of practical work, text books and lectures given by specialists.

Standardisation

Although training improved, any hospital could set up a nursing school and choose its own standards. In 1919, the Nurses Registration Act standardised nurse training and examination. When they passed their nursing certificate, students gained the professional qualification of State Registered Nurse.

In 2009 nursing became an all-degree profession, meaning that all student nurses are now educated in universities.

Activity

Working in groups of 4 or 5, each choose a country from a different continent of the world. Find out enough about nurse training in that country to talk for 2-3 minutes to your class. Discuss the differences and similarities.

How many countries require nurses to go to university? Which have a government system of registration? Consider how the differences you have found might help us understand changing attitudes to nursing education in the UK.

Fact: Florence Nightingale was resistant to initial campaigns for a register of nurses. She thought that the register would be out of date as soon as it was printed and more importantly, it would be difficult to quickly remove a nurse who had been fired for incompetence or misconduct.