

NURSING SKILLS

5: A 19th century nurse's tool kit



Nurse's chatelaine

1880-1910, maker unknown, owner unknown



Royal College of Nursing

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The chatelaine was the Swiss Army knife of the nursing profession. It attached to the belt, so that the tools that hung from it were always close to hand. During the 18th and 19th centuries most well-to-do ladies would have a chatelaine; although each would be different, depending on what tools the wearer considered essential for their household.

This nurse's chatelaine contains scissors, forceps, a darning needle and a tongue depressor. The forceps, scissors and tongue depressor were used when treating patients or observing their symptoms. The darning needle is not medical however. It would be used to repair fabrics; such as bed linen; a task associated with housekeeping rather than health care.

The changing role of nurses

Before the rise of hospitals and asylums in the 19th century, nursing was often carried out in the patient's home by their servants or family members. If extra help was needed, a nurse might be hired by the family, usually as a live-in servant. The main role of casually employed nurses was to comfort the patient and help with activities such as feeding and washing. These nurses could also administer "home remedy" treatments such as applying poultices, or making herbal infusions. It is unlikely that these nurses made a full-time living from nursing, and most probably did laundry and cleaning work too.

Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th nurses were expected to have both medical and domestic skills. The combination of tools on the chatelaine is a reminder that the reform of nursing from domestic task to recognised health care profession was not an immediate change but a slow transformation.

Activity

Thinking of your knowledge about surgical and medical techniques, and the ways the items on the chatelaine were used, do you think this equipment would be compatible with (a)

19th century ideas about germ theory and (b) modern infection control methods? How would a nurse need to look after the instruments in these different time periods?

Fact: Colney Hatch Asylum (later Friern Hospital) in North London had six miles of corridors including the longest single corridor in Europe. It took two hours to walk the wards so nurses would have been particularly keen not to forget to carry their equipment with them!

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