

LEARNING TO CARE

Jane Adams and Carol Bowsher

By the 1880s the transformation of nursing from low-skilled work to a respectable occupation was underway. Formal training courses were introduced across the country to meet the need for a workforce with the knowledge and skills to care for patients.

While the innovative drive of Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) in working for nurse education from the 1860s is well known, the movement for reform had broader roots in the rapid expansion of medical knowledge and hospital development that occurred in the nineteenth century.

A sharply gendered division of roles developed, shaped by prevailing ideas about inherent intellectual and personal qualities. Medicine was dominated by men while nursing was an overwhelmingly female occupation. Although medical examining boards were legally allowed to admit women after 1876, few female students were able to access the university education and clinical practice necessary to qualify as a doctor. In 1881 there were twenty-five women doctors in England and Wales. In contrast, the 1891 census recorded over 53,000 women working as nurses and midwives.

The Apprenticeship Model

Nurses were trained through an apprenticeship model with probationers developing skills and knowledge on the wards by caring for patients. This clinical experience was supplemented by lectures given by medical staff and senior nurses. There were few educational requirements for entry but character and personal attributes were deemed vital to success as a practising nurse. An 1895 guide for prospective

Train to be a
NURSE
*a distinguished
career for
women*

Enquire at your nearest Nursing Appointments Office or any local office of the Ministry of Labour and National Service or write to (Department N.R.) Spencer House, 27 St. James's Place, London, S.W.1

Nursing offered women status and an independent career. Ministry of Labour and National Service poster from the 1940s.

Courtesy Worcester Royal Infirmary Nurses' League, with kind permission of Margaret Craithorn.



Bed-making at Worcester Royal Infirmary in the late 1930s.

nurses listed these as 'a retentive memory, quick observation, habits of cleanliness and obedience, absolute unselfishness, a calm, cheerful mind, and an enthusiastic love of nursing'.

Curriculum content was determined by individual hospitals and reflected changing roles with less time spent on domestic work such as cleaning and laundry and more on specialist tasks caring for patients undergoing medical and surgical treatment. Training schemes were introduced at the infirmaries at Worcester in 1874 and Hereford in 1875.

Changing Standards

Mary Herbert, matron at Worcester from 1894 to 1917, a graduate of Nightingale's school of nursing at St Thomas' in London, was instrumental in improving training and raising nursing standards. In 1895 the hospital offered a two-year training programme including lectures with a hospital certificate given on satisfactory completion. Although probationers had to pay ten guineas for the privilege of this training, about nine applications were accepted and forty refused yearly.

Herbert noted that 'large numbers apply but a good many prove unsuitable or are easily deterred from following the nursing profession when they understand all that it involves'. In contrast at Hereford probationers could expect wages of between £8 and £10 while gaining their certificate over two years.

In 1919 a national register of qualified nurses was established, administered by the General Nursing Council (GNC). By 1938 some 97,500 general nurses had registered. A three-year curriculum was introduced, delivered through approved training schools. The GNC undertook regular visits to review training arrangements. Following a visit to Worcester in 1922, an Assistant Matron and Sister Tutor were appointed to oversee trainees. It took some time for the GNC to inspect all schools; the first visit to Hereford Infirmary was not until 1937 and in 1941 a further training school was approved at the County Hospital.

By the 1930s student nurses had to demonstrate knowledge of anatomy, physiology, medicine and surgery and to show they knew how to care for patients with a variety of conditions. Nursing knowledge encompassed many skills, including familiarity with the special diets recommended for various medical conditions and expertise in cleaning and dressing wounds to prevent infection. Before qualifying, a probationer would also have some experience of managing a ward as a staff-nurse.

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Training schemes for nurses were introduced at The Infirmary, Hereford in 1875.

Work in the Early Twentieth Century

Probationers were a significant proportion of the hospital nursing workforce. In 1907 there were ten unqualified and seventeen qualified staff at Worcester and in 1941 nineteen probationers to fifteen trained staff at the County Hospital, Hereford. Opportunities for trained nurses increased in both hospitals and community-based roles. By the 1940s there were over fifty nurses in training at Worcester and over forty at Hereford.

The care of patients meant long working hours. In 1907 the day shift at Worcester ran from 7 am to 8.15 pm, ending with prayers in the Infirmary Chapel. Some off-duty time was allocated each week but this was often only in short blocks of a few hours at a time. Nurses were expected to live on site or nearby with accommodation provided. The John Gwynne James Memorial Home for Nurses in Bridge Street, Hereford was renovated in 1883 and Mulberry House was built on the Worcester Infirmary site in 1897.

The Changing Status of Nurses

Nursing became a recognised and respectable occupation offering women status and opportunities for an independent career. By 1900 the new probationer nurses were typically under thirty-five, unmarried or widowed, with increasing numbers drawn from the middle class.

Mary Herbert's successful career at Worcester spanned over twenty years. In addition to improving nursing standards she promoted hospital improvements, including the construction of balconies to give better access to fresh air and sunlight to children suffering from polio and tuberculosis. A successful career in a provincial hospital could also lead to national recognition. In 1903 she received an invitation to join the India Office Nursing Board. ●

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Further Reading

Stuart Wildman, 'Changes in hospital nursing in the West Midlands, 1841-1901', in Jonathan Reinarz (ed.) *Medicine and Society in the Midlands* (Midland History Occasional Publications, 2007), pp. 98-114.

The Infirmary at www.worcester.ac.uk/your-home/the-infirmary
George Marshall Medical Museum at www.medicalmuseum.org.uk

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