

Nursing education in Alberta

Looking at nursing from the inside—

By ELLEN NYGAARD

There are probably few females whose noble maternal reveries have not at one time or another transformed them into a compassionate but efficient sister of mercy, presiding in impeccable white uniform over hundreds of feverish brows, grateful young mothers, and crying children.

There are few feminine roles more traditionally acceptable or more romanticized than that of the nurse.

"Nursing is an attitude. It is a professional attitude: the caring by the dexterity of hands. A nurse learns to nurse the patient according to the patient's needs," says Miss G. Purcell, Director of Nursing at the University of Alberta Hospital.

Such is the stuff that dreams are made of. And perhaps this is in essence what a nurse is made of.

But, as the nursing students at the Royal Alexandra Hospital know, and as Miss Purcell knows, there is an iceberg of reality beneath the romantic surface provided by Harlequin novels and myriads of similar Nightingale-esque legends.

Maybe for some students the reality is a continual flux between small failures and small successes in the close human relations of nursing. For some it consists of a future of early mornings

In a three-year program, the students combine theory courses: psychology, sociology, microbiology (taught by the university), clinical science, and 'practical experience'.

There are no electives in the program, and the students spend two days a week on duty during their first year, this time increasing during subsequent years.

Cheap labor for cheap education

The hospital offers tuition, books, uniforms, and room and board in exchange for the value of the students' labor, a sort of apprenticeship arrangement.

Miss Purcell emphasizes that this plan allows for those students who "could not afford to go to university".

She says that in terms of direct costs, a nurse's education costs the hospital between \$1,200 and \$1,400.

Therefore, she says, "the hospital isn't getting cheap labor any more than the student gets cheap education".

But the calculated "value" of the nurse's labor is far below minimum wage requirements. And there is no additional wage paid.

The student is expected to maintain a 60 per cent academic average and a 65 per cent average in ward work or "practical nursing". She is evaluated on the latter by the clinical instructor, who is on regular day duty on the ward.

Courses are set by the university committee on

If a student chooses to live outside residence, she must pay her own living costs.

A different approach to nurses' training is offered in College St. Jean's new two-year program, offered in conjunction with the Edmonton General Hospital.

It is unique among three such programs in the province in that it combines a university-oriented curriculum with hospital practice.

The first year of the program offers first-year university English, French, and psychology with a ratio of one hour of class time to three hours of ward work at the General.

In the summer session the first year, and in the second year, the ratio is one hour of classes to six of practical work. Second year courses include introductory sociology, philosophy, and Christian anthropology. Anatomy and physiology are taught at the hospital by a biology teacher from the College.

At the end of the 22-month course, the student is prepared to write her R.N. examinations, and has also completed her first year of university.

Students in the College program pay regular university tuition, plus paying for books, uniforms, room, and board. They are eligible on the same basis as university students for student assistance.

Students seem to have no financial difficulties under these arrangements, and there is considerable recompense in the fact that students become wage-earners after only two years, says Sister LeClerc, director of nursing education at the General.

Sister LeClerc is very pleased with the two-year program and says that she would encourage the introduction of this type of program in more hospitals. It is her feeling that the existing three-year programs are "on their way out".

Winds of change in nursing

This statement indicates that the winds of change are blowing in nursing in Alberta. But there are still many problems, and there are those who are examining nursing education as it exists for answers to the problems.

Speaking of her own program in particular, Miss Purcell admits that "there are not the broadening interests in Nursing School that there are in the university".

However, she says, the school attempts to involve its students in extra-curricular activities "such as choruses." The students are free to take part in university activities if they wish, dependent upon their amount of free time.

Another problem faced by hospitals and nursing schools is that nurses do not tend to be career-oriented, she added. This limits their interest to some extent in broadening education.

Referring to the three-year program as it now exists, the U of A director said "we are not preparing nurses for specialized areas such as the operating room. Employers feel that they are getting a specialist when they are not."

Commenting on the new two-year program, Miss Purcell cited a study carried out in a Windsor, Ontario hospital 20 years ago. "The two-year program was proven in 1948 to be adequate if there is adequate control of clinical instruction".

The U of A Hospital, due to the extended length of the course, heavily emphasizes practical nursing.

It is obvious that reforms in nursing education must be implemented from within the structures, particularly by the government and the administrations.

Nursing students tend to accept existing structures, but there are those outside the structures who are offering criticisms and recommendations.



CARING BY THE DEXTERITY OF HANDS

... the professional attitude of nursing

and late nights coupled with little recognition, little authority, and little chance for advancement.

For some reality is the repressive structures over their heads—the hospital, the government, the pigeonholing superstructure of society.

Up to this point, nurses and nursing students appear to possess little uniqueness with reference to the larger society.

But this microcosmic level of society does have its individual characteristics and problems. First we need to examine the functioning of the structure and then look at the resultant problems.

The nursing school at the University of Alberta Hospital offers an example of the traditional structure of nursing education.

nursing education, with authority delegated to them by the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses under the AARN Nursing Act.

The curriculum is based on requirements for the RN examinations: obstetrical, pediatric, surgical, medical, and psychiatric nursing.

The student-instructor ratio at the U of A hospital during the student's first year is approximately 8 to 1, with 370 students enrolled.

The hospital encourages students to live in residence, at least in their first year. Residence regulations are determined by the students and infractions of these regulations are dealt with by the house committee. The "honor system" is employed in enforcing regulations.