Practice nursing: profession or occupation?

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INTRODUCTION

Practice nursing is one of nursing's newer branches and as such it is still very much in its formative stage. Roles, functions and delineation of responsibilities are still being explored and developed. The speed of growth has shaken the foundations of practice nursing and altered the course of its development. The whole remit of the practice nurse has changed since 1989 and it will continue to change as the implications of policy initiatives come into operation in general practice. It is not only the changes that have occurred in primary health care that influence practice nurses but also developments in nursing. These changes will involve all groups of community nurses in an evaluation of their respective roles. It will be necessary to realign and reshape traditional modes of practice to meet the changing trends in health care and the different demands that they impose on nurses.

This pattern of change and progression in practice nursing and nursing in general is nothing new. It presents a microcosm of the historical developments of nursing and indeed of any occupation that is dynamic and strives to move forward. Keeping abreast of current issues demands a continuous process of change and progression; this process has never been more in evidence in nursing than it is today. To have knowledge of the evolution of nursing facilitates the understanding of where nursing is and the events that have shaped the present position. That in itself might seem enough but much
more important in the sequence of events is that some historical knowledge can help nurses to shape the future of the profession. To be able to influence professional growth it is necessary to have a sense of the long term development of nursing and recognize what has shaped its culture and continues to influence its aspirations for the future.

The term ‘nursing profession’ is frequently used; I have already used it in this introduction, though it is questionable how much its meaning is understood. In its historical development nursing has been through a process of professionalization. This has been brought about gradually and, for the majority of nurses, has passed unnoticed but it is a natural process that occurs as an occupation matures.

This chapter attempts to explore the issues that have influenced the development of nursing and determine the changes that have occurred in the occupational status of nursing that have moved it in the direction of a profession. Examination of these issues may help practice nurses to both identify and shape their role within health care.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES OF NURSING

Nursing has faced a long hard struggle to realize its aspirations of becoming a profession. It started from a point of anonymity and many historical influences have compounded and confused the issues.

The early Dickensian images of the Sarah Gamp type of nurse as drunken and slovenly are no myth. Pauper nurses were little better off than the paupers that they nursed and Louisa Twining, in her report on asylums in the 1800s, observed that the nurses were not respected, had no authority in the asylums and consequently exercised control through bullying those under their care (Longmate, 1974). Not a particularly good starting point for the reputation of nurses.

Nurses lacked any sort of status and they were regarded in very much the same light as maids. A clear account of the position of nurses is given by Rosemary White (1978) in her work on the development of the nursing profession. She cites John South’s description of the organization of a ward (1857). It portrayed the nurses as nothing more than ward maids and the sisters as their supervisors. The sisters had an additional