St. Paul's Hospital School of Nursing 1907-2007

In 2007, St. Paul's Hospital celebrates the 100th anniversary of the opening of its School of Nursing, which played such a vital role in making this hospital a strong, vibrant contributor to the health care system of Vancouver and British Columbia. Led by the Sisters of Providence, the School's rich history mirrored the sweeping social changes that transformed Canada in the 20th century. Nearly 4,000 nurses were trained at St. Paul's before the profession shifted its educational focus to postsecondary institutions. Although the School closed in 1974, there is a strong bond among former students and a close affiliation with the hospital. Through those graduates – who went on to become nurses at St. Paul's or other hospitals, entered postgraduate training, raised families and became involved in research or teaching – the School of Nursing has touched an entire community.

On October 18, 1894, five French-speaking Sisters of Providence stepped off a train in Vancouver to open the newly constructed St. Paul's Hospital. After a few years it became clear to the overworked doctors and Sisters at St. Paul's that there was an urgent need for properly trained staff to handle general nursing care. Only 11 Sisters and 11 employees were on duty at the hospital in 1906, and the city's pool of skilled nurses was very small. Given the scant resources available in Vancouver at that time, the Sisters of Providence decided to start their own training school.

In 1907, the call went out for young women who could meet the necessary requirements to enter the new school. They had to demonstrate good character, possess good health and be 20 years of age. Fourteen young women were accepted for that first class. On September 1, 1907 the doors of Vancouver's second school of nursing officially opened under the guidance of its first Superintendent of Nurses, Sister Hermyle. The inauguration ceremony took place in the community room of St. Paul's. The School's motto was "Intra discere, exi benefacere" – "Enter to learn; go forth to do good." Spartan dormitory style living quarters were provided on the top floor of the hospital for the successful applicants. Students had one free hour each day and one afternoon off in every week. On top of the free room and board they received $7 a month.

In the early years of the school, there was no formal system of caring for the sick. The St. Paul's Hospital School of Nursing training covered all the general principles of nursing, including the management of helpless and convalescent patients and diet of the sick; the best method of friction to the body and extremities, prevention and treatment of bedsores, bedmaking, changing clothes, moving and bathing bed patients, the making of poultices and applications of fomentations, cups and leeches and bandaging; the dressing of wounds, burns, blisters and sores of all kinds. The chief requisite of the student was following doctor's orders implicitly, and keeping the patient as comfortable and as cheerful as possible.

The nursing course took three years. Lectures and instruction were given by members of the visiting medical staff, the directress of the school and the Sisters in charge of the various departments. In addition, the students received daily practical training in the wards under the close supervision of physicians and Sisters. There was a one-month probationary period, but at any time during their courses, students could be dismissed by the Superior for misconduct, lack of physical strength, inefficiency or neglect of duty. There were few recreational amenities, but many reports of student nurses spending

many happy hours enjoying each other's company. At the school during this time, great emphasis was placed on seniority. Nurses did not pass through a door ahead of a doctor or a more senior nurse. They rose from their seat when approached by anyone who had more training than they. There was little intermixing between the classes in the residences.

A variety of publications elaborated on the type of woman most suited to perform the functions of a nurse. She was: A young woman of intelligent face, neat apparel, and quiet demeanour...Her skillful hand prepared food, her watchful eye anticipated every want. She was calm, patient, and sympathizing ... She did not stoop to simulate an affection she did not feel, nor to express hopes of recovery that could not be realized...She met emergency with knowledge and unruffled spirit. To the physician she proved an invaluable assistant, executing his orders intelligently, and recording accurately the various symptoms as they developed. She watched the temperature of the room as closely as that of the patient.

In the years between the two World Wars, nurses continued to work hard for modest wages. There was no compensation for overtime, holidays or sick days. And if a nurse broke an instrument, that amount would be deducted from their pay cheque

As one nurse who graduated during this time put it: "It is true that time softens harsh memories [but one remembers the good times] despite the arduous routine, the spirit of youth prevailed. We learned to discard uniform for regular clothes in record time and run for the streetcar to make full use of hours off or the half day. Streetcar conductors usually glanced toward the hospital side of the street and would wait for anyone on the run. We had four late passes each month—two for 10:30 and two for midnight.

Some 20 years after it was established, the School of Nursing was teaching as many as 100 students a year. Unfortunately this success meant that the school had outgrown its original building. Sister Therese Amable, who succeeded Sister Marie Alphonse as Superintendent of Nurses, was a 1917 graduate of the school, so she understood the need for expanded facilities. Despite the poor economy and tight finances, the hospital decided that it needed to grow. A new six-storey Nurses' Home was officially opened in October 1931. The new building had room for 200 students and offered a library, classrooms and recreational spaces. To show their appreciation, the graduating class of 1931 pooled their resources and gave the Residence a very special gift – a baby grand piano. The piano was the source of much entertainment in the nurses' lounge in the residence until the school closed in 1974. The building is still standing, and is known today as the Comox Building.

By the late 1930s and 1940s student nurses were starting to introduce a bit more fun into their daily regimens of work and study. A drama club was organized, and students began throwing the occasional party to which they could invite friends. But they still lived and worked under the strict eye of the Sisters, who were serious about providing their charges with a solid nursing education.

The many medical advances that occurred in the postwar period had a dramatic effect on the status of nurses. As the practice of medicine became more complex, nurses assumed tasks previously performed by doctors, such as taking blood pressure and starting IVs. There was a growing need for nurses to be skilled professionals who could be active participants in patient care. But the subservient stereotype persisted for some

time – in the 1960s, students were still expected to stand when a physician entered the room.

A more significant change for nurses during this time was the introduction of the eight-hour shift. Before this, the student nurse worked three alternating shifts. The split shift was from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. with the hours from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. off. The afternoon shift was from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., and night duty was from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. Half an hour was allowed for meals. If lectures were scheduled for any times in which the student nurse was off duty or on a day off, she was still required to attend them. Often the doctors' lectures were at noon, so those on night duty would have to get up and do their best to stay awake throughout the lecture.

During the early 1940s, the student nurse's uniform was a heavily starched cotton tunic, and she was required to wear white stockings and shoes, and to keep her hair up off the collar of her uniform. After her three-month probationary period, she wore a white starched cap. In surgery, the diet kitchen, case room and nursery she wore a cotton turban that completely covered her hair. There were strict rules about wearing the uniform anywhere but in the hospital setting. It was strictly forbidden to wear one's uniform on the street or on public transport. Once a nurse had graduated, she was usually very proud to wear her bib and apron, but because they were so heavily starched, and consequently chafed the neck and arms, and became quite messy looking when worn during strenuous work, many nurses eventually chose to wear a more practical uniform. The cost of laundering the bib and apron was also a major consideration. New uniforms allowed the nurse more freedom of movement, and later, once polyesters and nylons became available, were even easier to wash and iron.

However, these did not appear until several years after the war. At the 6:00 a.m. roll call in the auditorium, the student nurse was expected to be fully dressed and ready for duty. No makeup was permitted. After roll call and morning prayer led by Sister, each student passed in single file past Sister Columkille, who thoroughly checked each nurse's appearance before allowing her to descend the stairs to the cafeteria for breakfast. Sister Pulcherie presided over the hot steam tables, and usually greeted the sleepy nurses with a cheerful Bonjour! Breakfast usually consisted of porridge or toast, but occasionally there might be a boiled egg and sometimes on Sunday, even a rasher of bacon.

Then there were the Sisters of Providence. As one nursing graduate put it, "In my time there were many of them, they seemed to be everywhere! Their presence was felt everywhere in the hospital. To my knowledge, students of all faiths respected the Sisters and learned from them to become disciplined young ladies. These dedicated women were caring and friendly and evidenced their love for students in training."

Students entering the School of Nursing began with a six-month probation period, giving rise to the well-known nickname "Probie." If their performance proved satisfactory, the new students were "capped" after six months. The ceremony took place in the hospital auditorium where the nurses in training were handed their first cap. This was an eagerly anticipated event for the new students who invested much pride in their right to wear the distinctive white cap. It told the world they were nurses, even if graduation was still a long way off and far from certain.

Graduation was a huge celebration at the School of Nursing. Ceremonies were held at the Vancouver Hotel Crystal Ballroom. Pedestrians and traffic frequently paused to take in the sight of the proud students, escorted by a police guard, marching down Burrard Street in their navy blue wool capes with red lining and starched white uniforms. Originally the nurses were given the capes to keep warm on winter days. In later years they were worn only for more ceremonial occasions such as graduation.

By the early 1950s, it was accepted that more room was needed in the student nurses' packed schedules for a bit more extracurricular fun. Students quickly formed a Student Nurses' Association, a glee club and an art club. Sports activities became a welcome part of the school agenda and St. Paul's students participated in interschool sports events with their peers at Royal Columbian and Vancouver General hospitals. The hospital administration encouraged students to take up softball, swimming and tennis (and later, basketball and ping pong) as a way of relaxing and connecting with other student nurses in the area. But inter-hospital competition was known to get fierce – St. Paul's students especially relished a win over their cross-town rivals at VGH.

Sisters as Student Nurses Sisters continued to attend the nursing school throughout the 1950s. Their life was somewhat different from that of their fellow students, however, as they lived with the other Sisters on the sixth floor of the hospital. And at graduation the Sisters were never seen on stage with the signature bouquets of roses, like the other graduates. They were included in the official class photos, but they knew that their role at graduation was to sit in the audience.

When the first class graduated from the School of Nursing, a cherished tradition was established: the School of Nursing graduation pin. Like other nursing schools, St. Paul's provided graduates with a pin that represented where they took their training. Nurses would proudly wear this pin on the lapel of their uniform. The School of Nursing's graduation pin was changed in 1916 with the introduction of a Maltese Cross shape. The sharp corners of the pin were rounded out 10 years later and this oval style was retained for almost 60 years. The nursing pin was absolutely treasured. It represented an awful lot of hard work along the way to graduation. They would wear it on our uniform every day to work.

The winds of change were blowing through the School of Nursing in the 1960s. Rules that had been on the books since the school opened its doors came under review and were relaxed under the leadership of the school's Director, Sister Mary Michael. Prior to that time, students who became pregnant had to stop training. Recognizing the increasing complexity of the nurse's role, entrance requirements were also upgraded. In 1964, the minimum educational requirement for admission to the training school was completing Grade 12. The age requirement was 18 years by the date of entry into the school.

During these years of change, the Sisters of Providence remained front and centre at the hospital. They reinforced daily the proper approach to patient care and a Sister was assigned to monitor every ward. She would remind nurses if a call light was on for too long, or if a patient needed attention. Many students in the School of Nursing would attend morning Mass in the chapel every morning. Loudspeakers installed on all the floors and wings enabled all patients to hear morning and evening prayers. Sisters would continue to lead the School of Nursing until the departure of Sister Mary Michael in 1963. In addition to mastering the more straightforward challenges of a nursing education, the

students were also learning about the St. Paul's tradition of caring for the needy. This tradition flowed directly from the values of the Sisters, who treated all with dignity and respect, and honoured their mission to continue the healing mission of Jesus through practical charity and compassion.

St. Paul's School of Nursing offered an affordable way for young women and men to gain a nursing education. Although the student nurses wouldn't get rich on their monthly stipend, it did save them from the mounting tuition costs that students deal with today

Along with the many new beginnings, the early 1970s also heralded a significant ending for St. Paul's: with the closing of the School of Nursing. The hospital decided to begin phasing out its program and shut down the school in 1974. This was in response to a growing trend in training that emphasized a concentrated academic learning process followed by an internship. It is interesting that, at the same time, the training of medical interns was shifting in the opposite direction; interns were gaining more experience in hospitals while attending medical school. In 1971 the last class was registered in the three-year program, with enrolment reduced from 100 to 60. After that, no more new students were accepted.

As the number of students declined each year, parts of the Nurses' Residence were gradually converted to offices. St. Paul's was the first hospital in Greater Vancouver and Victoria to phase out its nursing school, but all the other training hospitals soon followed suit. Nurses would receive their academic instruction at Vancouver City College, the B.C. Institute of Technology or the University of British Columbia. Their clinical training would take place in several of the city hospitals on a rotating basis. To mark the closing, graduates were invited to tour the Nurses' Residence for the last time. Arrangements were made for as many as possible to come in uniform, and they were invited to attend the final graduation ceremony at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Each class hosted its own dinners, teas and other activities to celebrate the school's contribution to health care, and to mark its passing. Some 700 graduates returned to honour their school. After 67 years and the graduation of more than 4,000 students, the class of 1974 marked the end of an era for St. Paul's.

The growing emphasis on advanced education for nurses reflected the increasing demand for specialized skills. The closing of the St. Paul's School of Nursing in 1974 was part of a trend that saw training shift to postsecondary institutions. But St. Paul's commitment to education didn't stop with the closing of the School of Nursing. Most important, patients continued to benefit from St. Paul's position as a teaching hospital that was filled with experienced personnel who were guiding the next generation of health care professionals.

Universities began to offer Masters degrees in the fields of clinical nursing, nursing research and nursing administration, which led to more graduates taking on key leadership roles. In recent years, there has been an acceptance that to contribute fully as partners in health care, nurses would need even more education; by 2000, it became mandatory for Registered Nurses in B.C. to have a university degree.

While the role of the nurse has been transformed radically over the past century, the essence of nursing remains unchanged. Nurses are at the heart of patient care.