

THE EXTENDING ROLE OF THE NURSE IN 19TH CENTURY GLOUCESTER

During the mid seventies of this century there was widespread concern amongst many nurses with regard to procedures carried out by nurses under the umbrella title of the Extended Role of the Nurse. Many letters were written to the press decrying this move to take over tasks that were identified as rightly belonging to the doctor. The Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) in 1977 published a circular entitled The Extended Role of the Clinical Nurse - Legal Implications and Training Requirements and the RCN in 1979 developed the theme in a booklet with the slightly amended title The Extended Clinical Role of the Nurse. In the introduction it referred to nurses "undertaking a task which has hitherto been regarded as the prerogative of other professionals in the medical and para medical field".

Anxiety about the nurse usurping the doctor's role is not a new phenomenon as the story of the fight to get the Midwives' Act of 1902 and the Nurses Registration Act of 1919 on to the Statute Books clearly indicates. The physician, Thomas Fuller, in 1730 asks that she is "not so conceited of her own skills as to give her own medicines privately".

In the preface of his Handbook for Nurses Dr J.K. Watson stated that he would "abstain from discussing the vexed question as to how much medical knowledge we should impart to our nurses". He went on to say that "it is common experience that the more highly qualified the nurse the less likelihood is there of her attempts to usurp the role of the medical man".

Miss Luckes, whose General Nursing was adopted as the standard textbook for nurses in training by the Gloucester Infirmary in the mid 1890s, took considerable trouble to explain the position of the doctor in relationship to the nurse. "Training Schools for Nurses are not established with the object of supplying second or third rate doctors but to produce first rate nurses". Chapter IV begins with a section on the distinction between the work of doctors and nurses and identifies that the "important work of the nurse lies in carrying out the plan of treatment prescribed by the doctor".

The first records to give a clue to the details of the work of nurses in Gloucester are those of the Overseers of the Poor in the City Parishes in the 18th century, in the Accounts of Extraordinary Disbursements to Those in Need. A nurse was apparently an expensive luxury. Normally the overseer paid one neighbour to tend or nurse another and the disbursements of 6d or 1/- to Goody Olive Packer or Skillan to look after Goody Elliott, Widow Hallen or Dudson's wife are most frequent entries. These 'nurses' frequently appear at other times as recipients of care themselves. On the occasions when the nurse was called in she was rarely identified by name but her title always warranted capital letters and she was paid a fairly standard 5 shillings for attendance. One unusual record, however, mentions the nurse by name and identifies the procedures she carried out. In the Parish of St Michael in the City of Gloucester in 1763 the overseer paid Mrs Taylor 3/- for "curing Brown's girl of the Itch" and just 3p for bleeding Widow Hornidge.