

RCN COMMISSION ON NURSING EDUCATION

Extracts from Written Evidence on behalf of Christopher Maggs and Monica Baly, Editor of the History of Nursing Bulletin and Chairman of the History of Nursing Group respectively.

1. In our evidence to the RCN Commission on Nursing Education we offered the following in support of our contention that nursing education at all levels needs to have some input which effectively deals with the past. The past offers nurses not only descriptions of previous experiences and events. Analyses of those experiences provide nursing with explanations, with the potential for learning for the present and for the future, and another tool for developing that critical awareness which is vital to a research-based profession.
2. Without a knowledge of the past, nurses are without memory and self-knowledge. They are working in the dark, in a vacuum of ignorance. History is functional, 'relevant' that is, in the sense that a profession needs to know itself and to understand its relationship with its past in order to develop. Without this critical awareness of the past, nursing will struggle to discover itself in each generation. History offers the possibility that as well as discovery there can be learning.
3. There is some evidence at a practical level that students of nursing and their teachers make assumptions about health and health needs as well as health provision in the past which are not only unfounded but are potentially dangerous. To take a simple example. The Poor Law developed not only the services to the chronic sick but also contributed to the development of general nursing. Yet the Poor Law is often portrayed in a negative way, often in contrast to the positive picture of the National Health Service.
4. Failure to understand the complexity of nineteenth-century society leads to sweeping generalisations about the origins of health care and allied services. Few nurses are aware of the inter-relationship of political, economic and social change which produced the unique British experience. Any course which omits any one of these elements cannot claim to offer a comprehensive account of the development of health care or of the nursing profession.
5. Lack of real understanding of the development of nursing has led to real misunderstanding of the role of women in society and the role of women as nurses in particular. Continued emphasis on 'significant' people or events fails to cope with the real aspirations of most workers, whose interest in the past stems from their own experiences and not just those of the leaders of the profession. We know next to nothing about the contradictions between nursing and women's social roles in the nineteenth century. We know nothing about the relationships between male and female nurses in any time period.